Foucauldian Cautions on the Subject and the Educative Implications of Contingent Identity

Cris Mayo
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Foucauldian theories of identity have been of particular use to AIDS educators, primarily those engaged in educating adults. Their experiences with the inefficacy of risk group-directed education and the disjunctures of identity and activity categories highlighted the contingent and shifting meaning of identity and the shortcomings of using identity categories in stable and certain ways. Similarly, educators have noted the tension in a definition of childhood as innocence and adolescence as abstinent. These, too, are identity categories where activity within the groups does not conform to what are taken by some curricula to be founding elements of that identity. These and other implications of contingent and non-foundational identity would be useful to educators addressing children and adolescents, not only in the context of sexuality, but identity in general. Interrogating the constitution of the subject within and by power has been taken by some to indicate the end of the subject as well as the end of agency. The task of this paper will be to show the usefulness of cautions about the "subject." In addition, I will suggest educative applications of contingent conceptions of identity. Foucault suggests that identity has come to be a central means of the constitution of the subject. But, as Foucault warns, the subject has a dual nature: the subject is the starting point of agency and the subject is subjected to categories and power that constrain as much as enable its action.[1] Non-foundational and contingent conceptions of identity raise this dynamic as a central problem to be examined and negotiated.

First, I will address the workings of power in the constitution of the subject, with particular reference to sexuality. I will then turn to the promise of social constructionist genealogies in order to expand the range of what might be considered sexuality, identity, and adolescence. In conclusion, I will explore a number of strategies advocating post-identity practices that avoid the problematics of normalizing and foundational identity. An emphasis on contingency allows students a broader range of strategies to negotiate their relationships with each other, as well as their relationship to identity.

The Subject and Subjectification

Foucault and others have suggested subjectivity can be seen in a two-fold sense, that of being a subject and that of being subjected to. The latter conception of subjectivity warns that subject positions limit possibilities and attempt to exhaust the limits of identity within their own internal norms. In short, the excesses of attributes are trimmed to fit the identity category. Further, subjectivity creates subjects, individuals who are then understood as the origins of agency, but who are less disconnected from vectors of power and the force of tradition than that claim to subjectivity would suggest. Subjects are created as the purported sites of agency, but according to Foucault, agency lies in the constant interplay between strategies of

power and resistance, not in the self-consciousness of the subject. The idea that the development of self-consciousness and a sense of identity comes prior to the ability to act is a ruse. First, it falsely equates self-understanding with the ability to remove oneself from one's situation, as if self-consciousness could remake the world that precedes the subject. Second, subjectification takes place in a context where limited and delimited identity categories are all that is available. The great struggle to find freedom in identity leads to a category whose limits preclude freedom.

Thus, the Foucauldian concerns about identity include both an overarching criticism of the concept of the individual subject as independent agent and a criticism of the various categories used to organize types of individuals into recognizable groups. His view of power emphasizes local interactions as important to the working of power. In addition, Foucault contends that resistance accompanies power, not as an outsider but as part of the dynamics of power relations. Further, Foucault is useful for presenting sexuality as one of the main areas of problematization in the contemporary culture. Because his theories attempt to trace the discourses that have made sexuality central and the responses that attempt to wrest control from these discourses, his method of genealogy is helpful for disentangling the competing discourses and resistances that attend contemporary school controversies over sexuality.

Sexuality has a central place in the constitution of what it is to be a modern subject. Tracing the configuration of power from that of the sovereign to modern bio-power, Foucault notes that the subject of power has changed, as well as the ways in which power works. Power ought not to be conceived as solely juridical, coming from the prohibitive force of law, but as productive. Power does not act as repression, but rather produces responses to discourse that may conform to or resist power. Foucault argues that new methods of power are "not ensured by right but by technique, not by law but by normalization, not by punishment but by control, methods...deployed on all levels and in forms that go beyond the state and its apparatus."[2] Thus, modern bio-power is concerned with the intensification of bodies and populations as sites of normalization.

To this end, modern power is a power "bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them."[3] This is not simple repressive power or, in the case of the deployment of sexuality, a singular discourse but rather multiple discourses.[4] The growth of these discourses has affected "a dispersion of centers from which discourses emanate[d], a diversification of their forms, and the complex deployment of the network connecting them."[5] This process of normalization extends power from the sovereignty of the king into micropractices of the self, relations, and the body. Thus, much that other conceptions of identity take for granted as natural substrates are, in Foucault's view, highly infused with power and have increasingly become the object of knowledge. The more power infuses everything, the deeper the knowledge of the subject about itself becomes. He argues that an increased emphasis on sovereignty is not the antidote to this normalizing power. Both sovereignty and normalizing power are closely related to one another.[6] The individual who is the

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supposed bearer of sovereignty is the product of normalizing power: "The individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation. The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle."[7]

But while power has increased the extent to which it penetrates subjects, resistance always accompanies power, but is not "in a position of exteriority in relation to power."[8] In addition, power is relational, its "existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support or handle in power relations."[9] These resistances are capable of "producing cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds."[10] Resistances effective on one level may also fail at another level. The relations of power and resistance that Foucault draws underscore the unpredictability and the extent to which there are multiple relations of power and resistance that are not easily analyzed. But, according to Foucault, this should not lead to apathy but rather "to a hyper— and pessimistic activism."[11]

Foucault contends that bio-power's concern with populations and disciplinary power's attention to individuation and normalization dovetail together to deploy sexuality as the purported key to the modern subject's self-understanding. According to Foucault, "[Sex] became the stamp of individuality — at the same time what enabled one to analyze the latter and what made it possible to master it."[12] This deployment of sexuality, rather than providing a way out of power has, "its reason for being, not in reproducing itself, but in proliferating, innovating, annexing, creating, and penetrating bodies in an increasingly detailed way, and in controlling populations in an increasingly comprehensive way."[13] Part of the extension of power into bodies has the function of making "it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning, a secret to be discovered everywhere."[14]

The deployment of sexuality thus has the effect of extending and deepening notions of what it would mean to have an identity and define specific places on the body as integral to that identity. In addition, as subjects become more introspective they also come under the watch of experts to help them understand their motivations and drives. These drives and desires are themselves aspects of power, both the constructions of power and the now indispensable elements of self-understanding. Indeed, Foucault explains that his original intention in doing a genealogy of sexuality had been to study desire, but that the trail of desire led to a concern with the interior workings of the individual or "a hermeneutics of the self."[15] His intention was to "learn to what extent the effort to think one's own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently."[16] Genealogy is useful for students negotiating their own identities because "it disturbs what was considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself."[17] By doing a genealogy of

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identity, students can be encouraged to examine the power relations, uses, and disjunctures of identity. They can ask questions about the ambivalent uses of identity and the relationship of identity to exclusion and limitation.

Contingent Contexts

In a move that seeks to push the limits of possibility without recourse to normalized identity, Foucault argues that "the rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures."[18] Social constructionism studies the varieties of "bodies and pleasures" that arise in different times, contexts, and relations. Just as Foucault was not attempting to find a way out of our contemporary state by studying the Greeks, but finding a way to think differently, social constructionist studies of sexuality trouble the foundations of commonly held assumptions about the naturalness and continuity of sexuality. For social constructionists, the foundation of concepts like sexuality shift over time so that it becomes difficult to even define what is considered sexuality, if anything. In addition, social constructionists look for resistances to dominant conceptions of sexuality and gender, local knowledges, and challenges to accepted practices.

This acceptance of the shifting foundations of categories makes social constructionism a particularly useful ally for notions of identity that also stress contingency. Indeed, the concept "sexuality," because it is so reliant on a variety of meanings, may not even follow from what looks like from our perspective to be sexual acts. Desire, definition of gender and the very materiality of bodies are all historically and contextually contingent categories. The point, then, is not to uncover a natural sexuality but to examine relations in context that form particular sexualities and define particular relations as problems.

Social constructionists warn that we should not presume the continuity of sexuality from one time period to another. As Carole Vance has argued:

> [To] the extent that social construction theory grants that sexual acts, identities and even desire are mediated by cultural and historical factors, the object of study — sexuality — becomes evanescent and threatens to disappear. If sexuality is constructed differently at each time and place, can we use the term in a comparatively meaningful way?...Is there an "it" to study?[19]

The difficulties of defining what is meant by sexuality or the place of sexuality in meaning systems vary and this has implications for how we understand the interplay of identity and activity. These understandings are particularly crucial for safer sex education. For instance, the globalization of Western, most specifically American gayness has altered the ways that local forms of homosexuality negotiate themselves. Katie King distinguishes between the globalized "gay" and the localized "homosexual" noting that even "homosexual" may not be the pertinent term in many local concepts.[20] As the concept "gay" gains more recognition, other forms that may or may not have been related to it are subsumed under it. The differences of social dynamics and meanings change with the newer understanding of what "gay" has come to mean. King explains the shift this causes in northern Mexican understandings of homosexuality, where, like in other areas of the Americas, the "passive" or receptive partner in anal intercourse is understood as homosexual,

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whereas the active partner not.[21] Globalized understandings of "gay," however, disrupt this and draw the active partner as well into implicatedness in a gay identity and the discourse of gay rights. This shift has tended to occur among men who had been to the U.S. and were thus receptive to educational programs directed at gay men. But local understandings persist as well and resistance to the globalized "gay" brings into play the resistance to Americanization and the separation of same-gender activity from the realm of heterosexuality. In other words, the separation of sexual identity into homosexual and heterosexual disrupted the social relations of men involved in same gender sexual behavior. Where locally held understandings of sexuality held that a man could penetrate a partner of either gender without his masculinity being in question, the "international" definition of "gay" challenged his ability to do so. This same "global gay" definition also challenged the social approbation placed on this perceived loss of masculinity as well as the partially negative valuation of the passive partner, who had been in a role akin to that of "other woman." For safer sex educators, understanding these contingencies of identity enable educational programs to address themselves to local identities that may be closely interwoven with global understandings.

These same complications of local meanings and global meanings play out in young people's understandings of their sexual feelings and experiences. Indeed, what an outsider might view as a sexual relationship might not be viewed by the participants as such. That young boys masturbate together is not often considered to be an expression of their homosexual desires, but rather a group form of competition or amusement. But what is the interaction between these social forms and more globalized meanings of gayness? For some, engagement in these activities will figure as founding moments in their development of a gay identity, for others memories of these experiences may either fade or be denied because they do not form a founding or even important moment in their definition of their sexuality. Because of the interplay between identity and experience, then, experiences not crucial are not there in the same way they are if they are viewed as crucial. This is not simply a case of repression, although it may be, but also a marker of how meanings coalesce and those experiences peripheral to identity sometimes were not there in the first place or disappear sometime after. Social constructionist methodology would enable one to ask questions of these complicated situations to attempt to decipher how they might function as problems, what their place is in defining sexuality and according to whom and why. By being attentive to the disjuncture between identity, activity, and commonly held definitions, social constructionism allows a greater understanding of the shifts and contradictions in localized and contextual sexual practices.

The identity category of "adolescent" needs to be put to the same scrutiny as the concept of sexual identity. Adolescence is defined as irresponsibility and recklessness. This affects not only how adolescents are perceived but what is deemed appropriate for them to learn. Curricula address adolescents considering sexual activity as individuals who simply need to learn refusal skills, not people involved in relationships with one another with complex reasons for engaging or not engaging in sexual relationships. When educational materials directed at protecting young

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people from HIV presume a natural adolescent rebellion that will naturally result in unsafe sexual activity they neglect to interrogate the place of sexuality in adolescent lives. Curricula that warn teachers that adolescents are especially unable to plan for safer sex and thus should be encouraged to remain abstinent, position young people in ways that encourage self-fulfilling prophecies. Condom usage has been on the rise among some adolescents though it is still quite low. But to suggest that these rates are due to the particular inability of the adolescent sex drive to control itself or are do to adolescent feelings of immortality covers over the ambivalent position of adolescents. The period described as adolescence has lengthened considerably since its relatively recent solidification around the turn of the century. It is increasingly unreasonable to assume that people in the adolescent category can be reasonably expected to remain abstinent.[22] As a liminal identity, adolesence is subject to ambivalent messages — on the one hand, a strong message about the need for responsibility, as in some sex education curricula that encourage abstinence pledges and oath-taking; on the other hand, adolescents are equally constructed as immature and unable to handle the responsibility of sexual activity. These ambivalences show through in adolescent responses to surveys on sexual activity. More report engaging in sexual activity because they associate sexual activity with adult status than report doing so for pleasure. And adolescent girls report not planning ahead for sex or having condoms available because they know, as adolescents, they are not supposed to be having sex.[23]

In addition, particularly among heterosexually active adolescents, meanings about gender solidify. Fine points to the theme of victimization in sex education directed at young females and argues that this theme obscures both female sexual desire and the broad victimization of females that occurs within our social structure. According to Fine, a discourse of sexual victimization paradoxically disempowers young women by portraying them at risk from male sexuality while it encourages young women to see marriage as a haven from this victimization.[24] Fine argues that "the absence of a discourse of desire, combined with the lack of analysis of the language of victimization" slows the ability of adolescents to take responsibility for their sexual activity, especially among female students and non-heterosexual male students.[25] Since education prepares students for relationships and meanings in a world that preceded them, they too are engaged in the project of identity and its relation to power and difference. The categories and foundations of identity that education provides constrains not only students' range of identity possibilities but may also hamper their ability to engage with others, either those who do not conform to identity standards or those who inhabit other identity categories.

Schools play a role in demarcating proper from improper identity and inscribing boundaries around particular identities and activities. When curricula limit their discussions of "sex" to heterosexual intercourse, they mark out for students what ought to properly be considered sex, thus denying the safer potential of non-penetrative sex and denying the existence of same-gender sexual activity. Hetero-sexuality, most likely its abstinent form, becomes the unquestioned identity of all students. This is particularly problematic for AIDS and sex education curricula whose version of identity constrain in advance, students' abilities to negotiate safer

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sex and conceive of a range of possibilities for sexuality not limited to abstinent heterosexuality. Students need to be more critical of identity and cautious about how they understand themselves through categories. A more contingent, contextual sense of identity would encourage them to understand themselves not through a category but through a series of relations, to view identity as a process. Rather than most curricula seeing identity as a site of possibility, it becomes a site of closure and exclusion.

Cultivating Possibilities

To solidify itself identity requires an origin, whether in a tradition, biological base, or other foundational claim. This origin or foundation becomes the justification for the identity's coherence. But identities are not as pure and uncomplicated as they purport to be. Even at the founding moments purity eludes them: "What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity."[26] To cover over this disparity identities project disparity onto others. Because identity requires both a sense of its own solidity and because that sense is derived from the projection of difference onto others, identity is inherently insecure. Identities thus must negate parts of their complexity and negate their relations to others, even while both are integral to the possibility of the boundaries of identity. The loss is twofold, internal, in terms of a loss of complexity and external in the loss of ability to form connections and identifications with presumed outsiders.

To overcome these losses identity needs to be conceived as contingent, relational, and political. In *Identity/Difference*, William Connolly advocates for contingency in identity to overcome the fundamentalism that attends other conceptions of identity. He contends that the solidification of identity categories or personal identities requires the creation of an other whose difference enable the stability of identity. Identities clash because, when based on foundational claims to truth, they cannot accommodate each others' existence. Rather than accepting other identity possibilities as valid, identity categories relegate outsiders to the status of other or radical difference.

Theories stressing contingency in identity suggest that democratic pluralism insufficiently cultivates possibilities for identity because pluralism requires that identities already have a certain permanence and organization in order to be recognized by others. In addition, the process of recognition is not without its difficulties, and some already-constituted identity categories have difficulty in achieving recognition. For instance, the critique of natural and stable sexual identity inherent in a radical gay identity is lost when homosexuality is recognized only as a discrete and naturally occurring minority. Thus the recognition afforded to identity by democratic pluralism is insufficient in that it is unable to recognize or cultivate care for ways of living that do not take the form of understandable identity categories or possibilities that exceed current understandings of identity. Rather than emphasizing a pluralism that predetermines the categories it will embrace, Connolly advocates for pluralization, a care for identities and formations even prior to their concretizing into forms that would demand recognition.[27] In other words, a care for

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the abundance of possibilities that does not require that these proto-identities conform to what has previously been required of identities — that they organizeand that they follow certain protocols and forms for recognition from the broader society. Instead of creating the normalized individual, Connolly argues that pluralization would have greater care for the abundance of possibilities open to each person or group.

Because we come to expect identity to identify us, we relinquish those parts of ourselves that are not contained by the explanation a category affords us. To counter these problems, Cindy Patton emphasizes the need for "ob-scene" identity and education. Patton contends that "safe sex activists overemphasized the power of a given text, while disregarding its uses in myriad places and its interpretation by multiple publics."[28] To encourage multiple readings and multiple identity position possibilities, Patton turns to this promise of obscenity. She explains:

> Broken down into its original Latin components, ob-scene adds a prefix indicatiing priority to "scene," a root word meaning stage or theatrical place. Thus ob-scene means something like *before staged* or indicates something before the moment of spatial visibility in official space...[O]b-scenity is the abjected, the meaningless, the thing that does not try to recover meaning but tries to secure the space *prior to visibility*, prior to information.[29]

Obscenity, like pluralization, attempts to account for possibilities prior to their becoming normalized and concretized. The use of "obscenity" to describe an identity that tries to remain unnormalized underscores the difficulty of pushing limits of intelligibility. Pushing these limits of intelligibility may give more options to students trying to negotiate their way through the contingencies of identity. But there is also a discomfort with the obscene. Recognizable identity has a strong role in normalizing the subject and non-conforming groups or individuals are unsettling. However, education that attempts to address the complications of sexuality, students, and HIV needs to be open to the use of the obscene. Too often curricula have stepped away from sexuality activity among adolescents or neglected to address same-gender sexual activity for fear of offending. Safer sex curricula have long faced regulation as obscene material, pointing to our extreme cultural reluctance to address sexualities as legitimate areas of knowledge. The result has been the neglect of students, which is considerably more obscene.

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3. Ibid., 136.

4. Ibid., 33.

5. Ibid., 34.

6. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 108.

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12. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 146.

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