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Commentary: Borders as Sites of Pain

Claudia Strauss

I commend Valerie Walkerdine for engaging so deeply with the theme “Anxious Borders: Traversing Anthropological Divides” for the Presidential Forum of the Ninth Biennial Conference of the Society for Psychological Anthropology in April of 2005. In her article, she discusses two sorts of possibly anxiety-inducing borders, and critiques various postfoundational theorists.

The first is the border between psyche and society. As Walkerdine notes astutely (this issue), some anthropologists have contributed to the canard that the self is a modern invention by conflating atomistic individuals (which are distinctively modern and Western) with interior subjectivity (which is universally experienced). Walkerdine’s case studies demonstrate the difficulty of simply getting over our pasts, hence the ways in which our subjectivities depend on more than our momentary subject positions.

For the remainder of my discussion, I consider Walkerdine’s second point that social borders—especially those of class and work—are sites of pain. She illustrates that contention with stories of working-class British women who had university educations and moved into the middle class but never felt they fully belonged, of workers in South Wales who are dislocated by the closing of their central mine or manufacturing plant, and of Australian manufacturing workers who are trying, sometimes with great difficulty, to remake themselves as flexible service and sales workers. I was intrigued by the implication for theories of motivation. Generally, we focus on drives or the pull of desired goals, but Walkerdine’s examples remind us that action is not only impelled by positive

desires but also can be inhibited or deflected by guilt, anxiety, and melancholia. I am thinking of Susan, who does not take full-time lectureships because she wants to remain connected to her parents through shared poverty, or Jim, downsized out of his manufacturing job, who is willing to make a midcareer change to contract cleaning work, but balks at taking on the personality of an enthusiastic salesman for his services and so cannot get work. Her interview excerpts effectively illustrate her contention that the celebration of such class and work identity crossings as “hybridity” overlooks the psychological conflicts that can ensue from changed or mixed identities.

So, I agree such crossings can be difficult, but are they necessarily? At one point, Walkerdine makes the sweeping statement, “Living on borders must, in this analysis, always be anxious because there is always a duality that cannot be contained, there is always an excess that cannot be tamed to produce the normal individual. This border, therefore, for the subject who is an object of the gaze of power must always be a site of pain” (this issue). I am skeptical. Does it work the same way for all borders and all people? How about the borders between other kinds of identities (e.g., student to worker, or single to married to divorced, or the ones crossed every day between who we are in private and who we are in public)? The Foucauldian discourse is little help: If there is an “excess that cannot be tamed” should that not cause anxiety in the gazer instead of the gazed on? Are categories of normality really the problem for people like Susan and Jim?

Elsewhere in the article, Walkerdine presents more psychologically sophisticated theories of border anxiety. For example, she discusses the guilt of upwardly mobile women like Susan as a kind of survivor’s guilt or perhaps guilt about abandoning family (this issue). She contrasts Jim with others who do adapt to new class and work identities. These are good steps toward a more careful understanding of identity border-crossing anxiety.

Contrasting Cases

To arrive at a more comprehensive explanation, I thought of some contrasting cases among people whom I have interviewed. “Barbara Park,” an African American lawyer with a degree from Harvard Law School, and her husband, “Howard Flemings,” an African American engineer, also underwent considerable upward mobility, and, in Howard’s case, took on contract work without

any apparent unease. They were in their thirties when I first interviewed them in 2000. Barbara's father was a truck driver who supported a family of seven on an annual income of \$28,000 in his best years. Howard's father had been an insurance agent but was disabled in a freak accident, then he left the family when Howard was in high school. Their current careers put them in an economic bracket that until recently was out of reach for many African Americans. Still, this border crossing was hardly a source of guilt or pain for them:

Howard: We're just dealing with a couple issues in life. Barbara was saying the other day that she was wondering what's our goal, main purpose in life . . . she was saying her big goal was to become rich and she said, "What's your big goal?" and I said, "To support you in becoming rich. I'm here for moral support."

A contrasting example is provided by "Willowstar," whom I interviewed in 2005. She experienced considerable pain in her high school years as a result of her racial and ethnic border crossing. She is of mixed racial background (Irish, German, and Native American on her biological mother's side and African American and/or Puerto Rican on her father's side) and, to further complicate matters, although by appearance she would be categorized by most casual observers as African American, she was adopted by a white, highly educated, Jewish woman. Growing up in North Carolina in the 1970s and 1980s she felt out of place:

I was neither black nor white, which at that time was mostly black and white. [. . .] And I was nowhere on either end, mostly. Like I was not dark enough to be black. But I was expected to be black. It was assumed culturally that I would be black, like this is something that we're all born into, regardless of my white Jewish mother, who's an educator. [. . .] I was seriously affected, and found myself very angry by the end of high school.¹

Interestingly, Willowstar found greater acceptance among working-class white students than from either wealthier whites or blacks (most of whom, in the public schools, were working-class or poor). Willowstar does fit Walkerdine's description of someone for whom living on the border was painful, but Howard and Barbara do not.

I propose that to explain when people feel pain or anxiety at such identity border crossings we need to consider all of the following: (a) Structural and social obstacles; (b) how shared social discourses interpret obstacles; (c) real or fictional examples of people like you crossing that border, information on how to

do it, and emotional support; (d) learned dispositions (*habitus*, schemas); and (e) emotionally salient memories and conscious identities. As should be apparent, this approach combines various psychological (Vygotskian, cognitive schema, identity theory) and social theoretical perspectives.

Consider first how the above model would explain the seeming lack of anxiety experienced by Barbara and Howard in their upward mobility. It is highly relevant that they are only in their thirties, so have not had to face the extreme hostility that upwardly mobile African Americans were threatened with in previous generations in the United States. And their interpretation of obstacles has been greatly shaped by widespread social discourses that tell people they can achieve economic success regardless of their upbringing. Barbara subscribed to the individual achievement ethic:

I'm a big believer in personal responsibility and accountability and there's got to *be* something that says, "This is my contribution to this." I don't wallow in the fact that I wasn't, I'm not on the same level as everybody else, but I take what I've got and I make the best out of it.

Barbara and Howard were also personally acquainted with wealthy African Americans, including a close friend who in 2000 had made his first million dollars trading stocks and a professional couple who owned several fast food restaurants and lived in a 6,000-plus square foot home. They had received helpful information at critical stages in their careers. Barbara was particularly grateful for the encouragement of a college advisor who gave her the idea of going to law school, advised her to apply to the top schools, and then told her which schools those were. Although the cosmopolitan scene at Harvard required a major adjustment for Barbara, coming from her insular life in Louisiana, the skills she had honed as a voracious reader, articulate speaker, and hard-working student transferred to law school and her work first as a lawyer, then later in the corporate world. Finally, it is important to note that from an early age Barbara had the identity of a high achiever and Howard was "money hungry," identities that were encouraged by their families. Unlike some of the examples described by Walkerdine, although Barbara and Howard had left their families geographically and economically, they did not have to reject family values in their upward mobility.

The case of Willowstar is different. At her high school she was met with ignorance (e.g., questions about why she had freckles), harassment, and exclusion

from classmates who lacked the schemas to interpret the disjunctures between her physical traits (not typical of any racial type), cultural heritage (white, Jewish, middle class), and identity (white working class). She felt she had to remake herself at the most basic level of habitus:

I spent four years hanging out in housing projects, trying to be what I was told I was supposed to be. I was expected to be black. So how could I figure that out? [. . .] I'd go to the projects, and still try to you know, memorize music, I would memorize all kinds of physical behaviors and walks and things like that.

Yet it is too simple to say that mixed racial identities inevitably cause pain in the United States. Willowstar's family lived in San Diego for a year. There she found many others like herself:

And there was a whole spectrum of colors. And a whole spectrum of *shades* of those colors. And a whole spectrum of *cultures* of those shades of those colors. And I realized that there was nothing wrong with me.

For Willowstar, the pain of identity crossing was generated by the hostility she faced in her North Carolina high school, which in turn was the result of the scarcity of role models and relevant schemas, learned dispositions that were out of sync with her peers, and, as a result, identity confusion. It was not inherent in the border crossing itself.

Conclusion

Walkerdine's article is an important corrective to postmodern celebrations of hybridity that overlook the psychic conflict that can follow from cultural, economic, and social dislocation. Indeed, I have talked to U.S. workers who felt promotions to management would be a betrayal, and after Walkerdine's talk a U.S. colleague told me she had identified with the out-of-place feelings experienced by Walkerdine's upwardly mobile British interviewees at another level, going from a middle-class family and public high school to a college where the student culture was set by wealthy prep school students. However, we should also not impute pain where there is no hint of its existence (pace Walkerdine this issue, n. 2), and Barbara and Howard agreed with my analysis that this had not been a problem for them. More generally, the anthropological literature records a wide variety of reactions to upward mobility, participation in the new

world economy, and cultural border crossing, ranging from rebellion or pain and confusion to compartmentalization to delight.

Aside from the ethnographic facts of the matter, there is the theoretical point of why border crossing should cause pain. To explain this requires psychosocial theories that fully account for the specifics of contexts and the way people are shaped by them.

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Notes

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1. Transcription conventions: [. . .] = deletion; *italics* = emphasis in the original.