

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-80839-2 - Power and the Self
Edited by Jeannette Marie Mageo
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Power and the Self

Power and the Self deals with an important but neglected topic: the ways in which power is experienced by people, both as agents and as objects of the exercise of power. Each contributor presents a case study drawn from a variety of cultural contexts, including analyses of the appeal of Japanese superhero toys for American children; the conditions that lead to dehumanising treatment of patients in an American nursing home; the experiences of a Turkish immigrant woman in the Netherlands; the relation between the capacity to commit genocidal violence and “everyday forms of violence”, and the psychological effects of colonialism in New Guinea and Samoa. The introduction provides a readable historical review and synthesis of the theoretical ideas that provide the context for the work presented in the book.

JEANNETTE MARIE MAGEO is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Washington State University. She has lived and done extensive fieldwork in the Pacific, and she writes about self, power, transvestitism, spirit possession, moral discourse and cultural history.

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Foreword

Gananath Obeyesekere

This is a powerful collection of papers on “power and the self,” many of them original and inspiring and making decisive contributions to the social construction of selfhood or identity. Power, as we know, has come into deep play in the human sciences largely owing to the work of Foucault but it has almost taken a life of its own analogous to sexuality in the Freudian scheme of things. And, as far as “self” is concerned, despite the bold attempt by Jeannette Mageo and Bruce Knauft in their Introduction to give this term theoretical significance, it seems to me that the term has less than a definitive provenance in our current thinking. Is self coterminous with the Freudian Ego; or with the “I” and “Me” of G. H. Mead or, closer to home, of the self-psychology of Heinz Kohut? Is it integrated in the sense of the Eriksonian ego identity; or is it fragmented, as some antipsychiatrist thinkers like R. D. Laing, or almost all postmodernists and unrepentant Nietzscheans and Buddhists from at least the fifth century BCE, seem to imagine? Can people live with fragmented selves? To complicate matters some ethnographers, following some dubious South Asian scholarship, have posited polarized selves, the permeable “dividual” selves of many non-Western societies and the individual selves of the European world. I am glad that the editors of this volume have not fallen into that trap because I am not sure whether the invention of another globalizing binary opposition on the lines of the West and the Rest enhances our knowledge of being human. This opposition may be another orientalist conception reified as theory. I wonder how many theorists of dividualism have looked into the genealogy of the word “dividual” or at least have gone back to Nietzsche’s imaginative appraisal of this notion – not something about the rest but as a critique of the good old Western obsession with the Cartesian “I think, I am” and the reification of the Ego as the fixed point in the swirling ocean of methodological doubt.

What then is the contribution of the present volume? I think it is an indispensable forum for debating the very issues that I have tentatively raised. Hence this should serve as an excellent casebook for discussions in a wide variety of disciplines in the human sciences: history, politics, and cultural studies; and above all to those working in the area of cultural psychology and psychological anthropology. To put it differently, this volume ought to appeal to those of us concerned

with issues of subjectivity and power and the creative (and uncreative) interplay between them. Specifically, the discussions I have suggested could range from: a critique of the hitherto neglected idea of power in cultural psychology and psychological anthropology to the sophisticated theorizing of the self, in Mageo's chapter, to the detailed and finely grained ethnographic analyses that focus for the most part on individuals and the manner in which identities are constructed or "unconstructed" – if one might be permitted that neologism.

Several chapters deal with the "unconstructing" of self or personhood under the aegis of different power constellations. Take the case of Roger in William Lachicotte's chapter, who is pushed from one mode of treatment to another and from one diagnostic statement of his psychiatric condition to another. While we might think that this arbitrary shifting around of Roger's persona could have disastrous prognoses for his "illness," the patient himself weaves a precarious identity out of these conflicting and disturbingly irregular diagnoses of his condition. As his sense of personhood gets "unconstructed" he reconstructs it on another level. So is it with Mageo's Samoan women, caught between colonial and older indigenous values on female sexuality; as concepts of the self or notions of personhood gets "unconstructed" there is a progressive reconstitution of the self going on. Equally important is Katherine Ewing's sensitive examination of Nergis, the Turkish guest worker in the Netherlands, caught between two or more worlds, the imagined traditional world of her parents and kinfolk and the openings that the modern European nation state provides for her self-development. Here again is an attempt to discard the fragments of a former self and to create new conceptions of selfhood based on her enveloping experience with Netherlands' modernity and finally arriving at a point in which she can be reconciled with her own folk and with herself as a modern professional.

On the dimension of self and power, I am impressed by the two extraordinary chapters by Anne Allison and Nancy Scheper-Hughes. Anne Allison deals with her son "playing with power" as he engages himself with the new morph toys introduced into the world market by Japan and producing a new phallic type of cyborgian hero. As Allison recognizes, this example has its wonderful parallel in Freud's own observation of his grandson, the little genius who invents the famous "fort da" ritual whereby he expresses the idea of separation and loss and provides a creative means of coping with it. Allison argues plausibly that morphing toys also provide creative vehicles for dealing with issues that cannot be verbalized or even communicated with adults. More disturbingly, Allison points out that the merchandising of these toys creates another space, a not-so-creative one, for late capitalism. However, these arguments ought not to close off a larger debate as to whether or not a culture of violence is created, reinforced or legitimated by these toys and their merchandising. For it is certainly possible for these toys to heal one sore, only to suppurate the body social with another. And it is here that Nancy Scheper-Hughes' chapter is disturbingly instructive.

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Scheper-Hughes, like Freud and Allison, is dealing with her own loved ones, her parents who in their frail condition are interned in a place surreally named “The Happy Valley Nursing Home.” There is no “fort da” here; no creative morphing with power. Quite the contrary, these omnipresent institutions of modern American society represent a “genocidal continuum,” and Scheper-Hughes examines with an unflinching eye the closed arenas where peacetime genocidal activities take place and where an “institutional destruction of personhood” is being constantly enacted.

I have simply sampled some of the riches that this collection provides; there is not a single chapter here that I think does not make a contribution to the ethnographic interconnection between self/identity constructions, undoings and reconstitutions in the larger contexts of power plays and ploys.