Introduction

What happens when certain identities are no longer legitimized or validated by society? The goal of the present chapter is to understand the impact of radical historical and socioeconomic changes on discursive construction of identity, in particular, on subjectivities available in a specific society at a specific point in time. The current situation in post-Soviet countries provides a unique opportunity to explore this issue by examining lives caught in a rapidly shifting social reality. I will focus my analysis on the concept of womanhood as it is constituted, transformed and redefined in post-Soviet discourses. I will begin by comparing the political and economic situation of women in Soviet and in post-Soviet times, linking the socioeconomic conditions to discursive positions assigned to women by the preeminent ideologies before and after 1991, since at all times notions of acceptable femininities are closely tied to economic conditions and the distribution of wealth (Burr, 1998; Gal, 1978).

In search for new representations of womanhood, I will analyse two types of post-Soviet narratives: public and private. The public narratives consist of interviews and articles published in post-Soviet magazines between 1991 and 1999. While focused on women, these texts are created for and by the media, and at best can claim joint authorship; thus, they are mainly representative of attempts made to position women in specific roles. In order to consider women’s own positionings, I will examine the private narratives, women’s life stories, collected in the summer of 1997 in Kiev, Ukraine and St Petersburg, Russia. I will look at how these women reminisce, talk about and negotiate in everyday life the multiple meanings of being a post-Soviet
woman. The comparative analysis of the two types of narratives will allow me to investigate how various discursive positions and subjectivities prescribed through the media are being adopted, negotiated, contested and resisted by contemporary Russian and Ukrainian women struggling to occupy a place in societies undergoing drastic changes and transformations. Based on the evidence presented in the chapter, I will argue that looking at both sociopolitical and socioeconomic conditions is critical for understanding the range of subjectivities available to women prior to and following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Research methodology

Recently, reconstruction of gender identity in the former Soviet Union, and, in particular, the concept of post-Soviet womanhood, was subjected to a number of theoretical discussions and empirical investigations (Edmondson, 1992; Marsh, 1996a; Pilkington, 1996; Posadskaya, 1994a). Pilkington (1996) employed various methodologies popular in the fields of social psychology and sociology, such as analysis of the media texts, questionnaires, surveys and interviews with participants. The current project extends this methodological variety by adopting a narrative or life history approach. Narratives and, in particular, stories that people tell about their lives, have recently become the focus of the evolving field of narrative study, which posits narrative as the central means by which people give meaning to their lives across time (Gergen and Gergen, 1993; Josselson and Lieblich, 1993; Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992; Sarbin, 1986). Life stories are seen in this framework as coherent systems in their own right; they may be contested, negotiated and reconstructed, reflecting changes in speakers’ values, understandings and situations. Bringing human subjectivity to the forefront, the study of life stories clarifies how individuals make sense of their lives and what tacit cultural rules, implicit assumptions and belief systems allow this sense making to take place (Linde, 1993; Ochberg, 1994). Until recently, however, Russian discourse and, in particular, narratives have been overlooked as an object of analysis (see, however, Ries, 1997), being overshadowed by the study of post-Soviet politics, sociology and economy. Thus, the present study, while building on the previous scholarship, presents a new development for the field of post-Soviet studies, as well as for cross-cultural feminist investigation of women’s lives and for sociolinguistic study of ways in which discourses constitute human subjectivities, allowing people to narrate and re-narrate themselves.