

Editorial

This seems like a good moment for taking some stock. With everyone just back from their summer break, from beaches in the Mediterranean or hours of research in the British Library, or just plain procrastination (an under-recognised achievement), it is a good moment to reflect on the current state of psychosocial studies. In many ways 2013 is and has been an excellent year for the discipline – and, yes, of course there's a "but" coming, though I shall try to postpone it for a while. What follows is entirely my personal view, even if it is offered under the authority of the formal heading of 'Editorial': if I use the word 'we', it is meant as what Bernard Williams called the 'we of invitation' and I hope others will respond to it with agreement or dissent.

Why then has 2013 been a good year so far? First of all, the psychosocial network, formerly just that, a network, a set of email addresses, has become an organisation, the *Association for Psychosocial Studies*. When, some years ago, the very first conference was held and the attempt to thrash out a common ground felt very fraught indeed, this degree of organisational structure would have seemed a very distant and elusive prospect. Secondly, the Association has a legal status. As a charitable trust, with a membership, a provisional constitution and so on, the basis for real development and achievement seems to have been laid. That status means there are obligations and requirements laid out for the steering group of the Association, which have a touch of the reality-principle that is both exciting and a bit daunting. Not only has the psychosocial network been transformed into an organisation and a charitable trust but the third development we should be celebrating is that the Association has become a Learned Society. Whether or not we want to call psychosocial studies a discipline or a direction within other disciplines, we can perhaps recognise that it has a public existence and status as an intellectual endeavour that it lacked just a few months ago. Then, fourthly, the Association, as a Learned Society, is now a corporate member of the Academy of the Social Sciences and can make its voice heard in relation to the pressing issues of academic life today.

If those seem a bit tedious as things to be celebrating as the new academic year begins, the intellectual life of what used to be the psychosocial network and is now the Association for Psychosocial Studies is also really thriving. There are several journals associated with psychosocial studies – there is this one, the *Journal of Psychosocial Studies* and members of the Association are also involved in editing and publishing the journals *Free Associations*; *Subjectivity*; *Organisational and Social Dynamics*; *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* and the *Journal of Social Work Practice*. Publishing in the field is now extensive, with the publishers Karnac and Palgrave both having psychosocial book series. Then there are all sorts of exciting projects, networks and research areas: I'm thinking here of, say, MaMSIE (Mapping Maternal Subjectivities, Identities and Ethics) based at Birkbeck, or MiW, the AHRC funded Media and the Inner World network. I'm not trying to single them out for special praise, they are particular projects that are linked to the Association that I find exciting and important. And new research projects, new PhD students, new directions keep coming up and keep making the annual conference a truly fascinating venue. Above all, the sheer enthusiasm of postgraduate students in particular keeps convincing me, if I needed convincing, that psychosocial studies as a disciplinary area is meeting a deep and important intellectual need. Last year, for instance, I jointly ran some social dreaming events for postgraduate students, I was anxious beforehand as I am more used to doing this with psychotherapists. However, the sheer enthusiasm for new ways of approaching research material, for unlocking the emotional dimensions of research work, was really overwhelming. I felt genuinely privileged to witness the excitement of postgraduates thinking about new ways to open up their research fields.

So, these are all things to celebrate as we start the new academic year, and, no, I have not forgotten that I said a “but” was coming. Before that though, it is perhaps worth noticing another stock-taking that has been going on over the summer. In June, the BPC, the British Psychoanalytic Council, circulated a discussion paper. The paper, written by Harvey Taylor, was called *UK Psychoanalysis: mistaking the part for the whole* and was the first of a series the BPC will be publishing. For me, two features of the paper stood out. One was the sense of a need to re-orientate and

reach out to other organizations; for greater collaboration with universities and a broader and more inclusive sense of what is meant by psychoanalytically informed work. Incidentally, this is not meant to imply that psychosocial studies, as practiced in the Association, has to be psychoanalytically-minded. Rather, what sounded a chord with me was the sense that more needs to be done, that some energy has to be found to promote and extend a practice that feels it is at a crossroads. The second thing that struck me in the paper, even as the author was saying that, *“What is needed is a coalition of the willing and an identification of the services, practices and organisations that would lead in the direction of a fuller, richer profession,”* was that he was entirely ignorant of the existence of the Association for Psychosocial Studies, or the previous Psychosocial Network. An appendix to the paper lists collaborations and interdisciplinary work, and Andrew Cooper’s work at the Tavistock gets name-checked, but there is no reference to this journal, to the Association or to the university departments most associated with psychosocial studies. It often feels to me as if there are a lot of organisations in a loosely psychosocial ambit all wanting to reach out, to connect up, to refresh and reevaluate, yet somehow managing to pass on the stairs.

Which, of course, brings me to the “but” that I have been promising. The developments I have listed above (including in the BPC’s initiative and those of similar professional bodies) are real sources for pleasure and for a few brief but enjoyable moments of smug self-congratulation...*but...*

But – but, things still feel very fragile. There’s quite a heavy burden born by the Steering Committee for a start, and especially by its Chair. This is not so much the burden of work to be done – though that is a burden – rather it is the burden of the anxiety to be processed. The sense that everything could fall apart very easily, that there is no-one to take on the campaign once the present leadership drops out, moves on or just collapses exhausted in front of *Poirot* on the telly (yes, *Poirot*, things can get that bad). Of course, this feeling is not confined to psychosocial studies, it is widespread in academia and in the various caring professions. This is emphatically not the best time to be working in a university, or in the NHS, or in

local-authority social work, or, for that matter, in the desperately cash-strapped voluntary sector. It is a nationally and internationally grim climate and austerity hits all the professions with which the Association for Psychosocial Studies is linked.

But I also wonder if there is something *more*, something distinctive to, and about, psychosocial studies that gives it this embattled and fragile feel. Of course, I emphasize again that the embattled and fragile feeling is mine, you might not share it and all might be jolly well in your psychosocial neck-of-the-woods but somehow I doubt it. So, what might be distinctive about psychosocial studies that makes it feel particularly vulnerable at this time? And here, then, we are back at the question of what makes our discipline distinctive, the question that has been haunting us since the beginning some time ago.

For me, the heart of psychosocial studies is invariably the idea of relation. We, as individuals, groups and organisations are always, at all times and everywhere, in relation. This seems like a truism, yet it is surprisingly difficult to put centre stage. Over and over again the legacy of European thought pushes towards the individual and the foundational. Descartes' *ego* casts a long shadow. Even systematic attempts to put the idea of relation on a firm footing, like Max Weber's definition of a social relationship in his *Kategorienlehre*, tend towards a clunking attempt to talk about each individual taking account of another in some way. Even our own attempts to describe psychosocial studies to a potential audience tend to talk about the coming together of the inner- and the outer-worlds or combining insights from the social sciences with those of the psychological ones. This is not meant as a criticism of anybody, just rather as an observation of how hard we find it to take the idea of being-in-relation as *primary*.

And if we are always in relation, we are also always dependent. Again, this is also something that many of us would take as an almost self-evident truism. Of course we are dependent: on our parents, our partners, our employers, our children, our friends, our pets, our stable and patterned environment and so on. Yet having said that we are always in relation and always in some state of dependency, we are also

put in opposition to some of the most deep-seated and persistent ideological forms of our times. Sigmund Freud recognised this when he said that the Americans did not realise he and his colleagues were “bringing them the plague” and Max Weber recognised it too when he said that it was precisely the job of our discipline to tell people what they did not want to hear. And what they do not want to hear right now is that there is no such thing as “autonomy”, or “independence”, or a “true self”, or “having power”, or “self-realisation” or “being in control” or whatever. But these fantasies – or rather phantasies, as they have deep unconscious roots as well as ideological ones – are profoundly scripted into the organisations in which and with which psychosocial studies has to work. They are there in the mission statements of our universities, there in the goals of IAPTS programmes, there in the aims of social work departments and so on. Psychosocial studies always has to work in partnership with others. It is one of the things we are most proud of: the Association for Psychosocial Studies is for practitioners as well as for academics. So psychosocial-studies academics, researchers and practitioners are working in organisations, in different kinds of actually-existing practice, in all sorts of settings where all too often those organisations and practices describe themselves and their aims in terms of which psychosocial studies is a standing critique. There is a tension built in to what we do. A tension which I think is unavoidable and irreducible. It can be a real pain in the proverbial but is an inevitable feature of our work as we define and undertake it.

So, as I said at the beginning, I think 2013 represents a good year for psychosocial studies and one with real achievements of which we can feel proud. But there is a huge amount still to be done, a lot of energy and work to be called for, and all against the background of what I think will be a struggle. There will be lots of moment of triumph, lots of smug moments – but (there it is again, the “but”...) invariably with a sense of pushing something uphill, which will, I think, not be going away.

Jem Thomas
University of West of England