

## **Psychosocial: qu'est-ce que c'est?**

**Paul Stenner<sup>1</sup>**

My title - which of course is inspired by the Talking Heads and by Asbo Derek (with a nod towards Canguilhem, 1958) – reflects the preoccupation with the nature and limits of psychosocial studies expressed, quite appropriately, at the inaugural APS meeting. My unscripted comments at that meeting were intended to encourage an open definition of psychosocial studies as a critical and non-foundational transdiscipline, and, in line with this, to discourage the premature consolidation of a version of psychosocial studies foundationed upon psychoanalysis (Stenner, 2014a). As I suggest in my reflections below, such a foundation risks an unfortunate ‘hardening’ of the categories ‘inner world’ and ‘outer world’ – a hardening which lodges a false sense of disciplinary expertise just where an open channel of constructive interchange is most required.

### **1. ‘Say something once, why say it again?’**

For me, a ‘psychosocial’ approach is an approach which attends to experience as it unfolds in and informs those networks and regimes of social interactivity (practice and communication) that constitute concrete historical and cultural settings. In my own work I have tried to articulate a *transdisciplinary* dialect (Stenner, 2014b) of psychosocial work building on my involvement in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the Beryl Curt Collective (a varying group that worked under a pseudonym - see Curt, 1994; Stainton Rogers et al, 1995). The Beryl Curt group was very

---

<sup>1</sup> Paul Stenner, Professor of Social Psychology, Department of Psychology The Open University  
[paul.stenner@open.ac.uk](mailto:paul.stenner@open.ac.uk)

much connected to the turn to discourse and text that was associated with debates around social constructionism and ‘postmodernism’, but unlike the forms of critical and discursive psychology that understand experience solely by way of the category of *discourse*, we began early on to take subjectivity seriously as an aspect of experience that cannot be reduced to discursive practices, even if those practices structure and pattern it. In my own work I have made efforts to modify and deepen the theoretical stance of radical social constructionism that captured our attention in the last years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In a sense, the word ‘psychosocial’ marks a point at which social constructionist theory reaches its limit and requires re-visioning.

A psychosocial approach is valuable because questions of psychology can be very poorly posed when abstracted from their cultural, societal and historical settings, and likewise, because these settings are poorly understood in abstraction from the living, experiencing human beings whose actions make their reproduction and transformation possible. Ultimately this is because no clear distinction can finally be drawn between what we all too crudely call the ‘inner world’ and the ‘outer world’. And yet this bifurcation between subject and object, inner and outer, psyche and social is the distinctive feature of the modes of thought that characterize modernity: a modernity in which the psychological has supplanted the theological as the key principle legitimating social order. Since Hobbes we have been increasingly obliged to think of ourselves as psychological subjects strategically aligned into a market-oriented social Leviathan, the better to pursue our self-contained self-interest. One might almost say that to be modern is to actively *make* a distinction between the inner and the outer world, and to consciously negotiate and come to

terms with one's place as an 'individual' in a social order. A double-bind then: we both must and cannot separate the inner from the outer, the psyche from the social<sup>2</sup>.

Much of the work currently done under the label of psychosocial studies attempts to resolve this paradox with the help of psychoanalysis, and hence psychosocial studies is taken to be some variant or other of psychoanalytical sociology. Psychoanalytical sociology is a tradition with roots in Freud's own forays into societal and cultural subject matters and, of course, in traditions such as the Frankfurt School which strove to combine Freudianism and its variants (which claim expertise over the 'inner world') with Marxism and its variants (which claim expertise over the 'outer world'). Personally, I don't think that any of the forms of psychoanalysis yet articulated can play a foundational role for psychosocial studies, which is certainly not to say that we cannot benefit from their many insights. Going back to basics, there is profound value, for example, in Freud's powerful statement at the beginning of 'Group Psychology' concerning the problematic nature of any effort to differentiate an 'Individual Psychology' from a 'Social Psychology'. All psychology, he suggests, is social to the extent that in 'the individual's mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent.' Human psychology, from before our birth (since even before birth infants are involved in fairly complex interactions) is social, and in this sense we are better thought of, not as individuals, but as *interdividuals* (see Girard, 1978). This means that the 'inner world', from before day one, is populated, as it were, by relations to others, and hence is better understood, less as a distinct and separate sphere, than as a fold within the 'outer world'.

---

<sup>2</sup> I have discussed this paradox in more detail in Stenner, 2004 & 2005, and Motzkau (2009) develops a variant of it in the form of what she calls the 'paradox of the psychosocial'.

## **2. ‘Can’t seem to face up to the facts’**

But despite this excellent beginning, in my view Freud mishandles the paradox of the psychosocial to the extent that the operations by which he conceptually *separates* ‘inner’ from ‘outer’ presuppose the Hobbesian package hinted at above. That is to say, they presuppose a valued and socially authorized but fragile realm of individual rational self-interest which floats precariously upon a turbulent sea of processes which are unconscious, volatile, de-differentiated and fundamentally social in a ‘pre-modern’ sense, whilst being consigned to the individual under modernity. The move made possible by these operations (discussed more fully below) permeates most variants of psychoanalysis, even the currently fashionable dialects, and is visible in the current conversational trend amongst psychosocial scholars to assume that those who do not or will not make a clear distinction between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ do nothing more than display their own neurotic or even psychotic tendencies (for the latter, see Craib, 1997). To start by fundamentally distinguishing psychic from social is thus taken, not just as the only epistemologically valid option, but also as the only sane possibility! But this position, I will suggest, results from abstracting and overextending a concept of the ‘inner world’ as a function of illusion, fantasy, wishful thinking, neurotic need, etc. It comes about, in other words, by abstracting and generalizing a concept of the ‘inner world’ grasped in contrast or even *in opposition* to the outer world.

Of course, nobody, least of all a psychologist, doubts that people are subject to illusions and wishful thinking, and it is to the great credit of psychoanalysts and psychodynamic thinkers more generally that they have taken up this challenge. But it is one thing to recognise that we often see

the world as we want it to be and not as it is, and quite another to *define* the ‘inner world’ as this very process of not seeing: i.e. as a realm which emerges precisely to the extent that it has nothing to do with the ‘outer world’. It is equally plausible, but perhaps a little more sane, to start with the assumption that *every* experience had by an ‘inner world’ has *something* to do with its ‘outer world’. From there we could go on to affirm that at different times and under different circumstances, we are able to grasp *more or less* of the events that constitute the universe our experiences form a part of. Personal development, social advancement, and ethics would then be about coming to a more adequate understanding of the broader world we are part of, the better to shape it in ways that suit our desires and values (the understanding of which is sharpened by this very process). But such an ethics presupposes an immanent unity of inner and outer, and not their radical separation. Our experiences, even the irrational ones, are part of a broader world and that world is ultimately a unity.

But in what sense does Freud (and his followers) make these moves and hence mishandle the psychosocial paradox? Again, the point is not to deny that what Freud called ‘neurotics’ suffer from a predominance of fantasy in their lives, preferring dreams of possibility to concrete experiences of reality, and hence living in a world dominated by imagination rather than perception. The point is that in concluding that neurotics are guided by the psychological reality of their inner worlds and not by the objective reality of what is real, we come to a definition of the ‘inner’ as *illusion* – a definition which is all too quickly generalized to the ‘psychic’ as such. I hinted that the schism this introduces between psyche and social, and the obligation to *begin* psychosocial work on its basis, presupposes a Hobbesian settlement. For Freud it is not just neurotics who are dominated by their ‘inner worlds’ (meaning a world of fantasy and illusion),

but also children, savages, women and those who gather in groups. Freud routinely insisted that wishes and impulses 'have the full value of fact for primitive man' (1938: 244), and *Totem and Taboo* is structured around the comparison of 'savage thought' with that of neurotics and children. Of course, the resounding conclusion to the latter work ('in the beginning was the deed') retains the theme of an originary point of contact between 'inner world' and 'outer world' in the form of an actual scene of patricide (mirroring the debate over whether a scene of actual sexual abuse may not occur in the real lives of children). However, this scene – which purportedly kick-started the inner fantasies that lent form to 'primitive' social structures - is located in the dim and distant past, serving only to explain how it was that the 'inner' came thereafter and forever to divorce from the 'outer' (save through the timely intervention of psychoanalysis).

Likewise, through his enthusiastic critical discussion of Le Bon in *Group Psychology*, Freud (1949: 18) remarks on 'how well justified is the identification of the group mind with the mind of primitive people. In groups the most contradictory ideas can exist side by side and tolerate each other, without any conflict arising from the logical contradiction between them. But this is also the case in the unconscious mental life of individuals, of children and of neurotics, as psycho-analysis has long pointed out.' My intention here is not to score points against Freud's lack of 'political correctness': compared to many, Freud is rather tolerant of what he calls 'primitives' and sees only continuity between children, neurotics and the rest of us 'individuals'. By 'individuals', however, Freud evidently means healthy modern educated white male Europeans as distinct from savages, children, working-class groups and neurotics. The difference is that those in the latter list are characterised as living lives dominated by their 'inner worlds'

(aka illusion), whilst we ‘individuals’ are capable of self-interested, self-contained rational thought, because the illusions that dominate the others have been consigned to our ‘unconscious mental life’. The characteristics of the modern educated male unconscious are thus, for Freud, the characteristics of the entire mental life of primitives, children, neurotics and groups: it is not susceptible to logic or reason, it is volatile, it tends to extremes, it is suggestible and subject to contagion, it is omnipotent, outside of time, it thinks in trains of associated images and metaphors, it is primitive and dominated by affect, it lacks a conscience and it is fundamentally unstable. There but for the grace of Freud go we.

The ‘inner world’ thus comes to be generalized into those irrational unconscious processes that were the ‘natural’ state of human collectives. If we are to be modern, however, these processes must be disciplined into the individual form of a fragile rational consciousness (permitting intercourse with the ‘outer world’ of reality) managing an illusion-ridden unconscious ‘inner life’.

### **3. The psyche revisited: is this not flesh?**

Surely we cannot seriously found psychosocial studies on this bifurcation between inner and outer in which the ‘inner’ of modern sophisticates turns out to be the ‘outer’ of pre-modern savages who fail to distinguish their inner from their outer. If there is a fundamental scene that must characterize the ‘psychic’ or ‘inner’ then that scene must be an *encounter* whereby a subject (whether a child, a neurotic, a dog or whatever) comes into being through experiencing its object or world. Such an encounter would be an actual occasion that could be viewed from the perspective of the ‘subject’ going through the experience, or from that of whatever is

‘experienced’ (i.e. the object). Naturally, not all experiences, so defined, are conscious experiences, and any experience that is ‘conscious’ must presuppose a good deal of activity based on experiences which are not conscious (i.e. events through which subjects emerge through encounters with objects). This is certainly not to say that illusion is irrelevant to our ‘inner life’. On the contrary, I suggest, following this Whiteheadian (see Stenner, 2011) train of thought, that direct experience of what we come to call ‘illusion’ is the primordial trigger for the provocation of consciousness. It is only when we encounter ‘illusion’ that we encounter its antithesis, ‘reality’ (i.e. that which is contrasted with mere appearance). It is only through an experiential encounter of the difference between appearance and reality that we learn about, and that means form a concept of, reality. And we learn not just about the world, but also about ourselves and our relations to that world. Hence far from being the key feature of ‘the unconscious’, an encounter with ‘illusion and error’ is the necessary precursor to self-consciousness and the stimulus for drawing the very distinction between inner and outer that flows from such consciousness.

The kind of fundamental scene I have in mind need not start with human beings. A dog will do. Aesop has a fable about a dog who dropped his piece of meat to grasp at its reflection in the still water of a pool. I had a dog like this when I was a child. She once mistook for firm grassy ground the green layer of algae that covered the still water of a pond. I will never forget the look of terrified astonishment in her eyes when the green gave way and she found herself unexpectedly submerged in water! We do not commit the crime of anthropomorphising animals when we point out that Aesop’s dog and my own had experiential encounters with something like *illusion*. Aesop’s dog *took* the image of meat he saw in the water to *be* the kind of real meat

he could chew up and eat. Badger (my dog) *took* the image of green she saw to *be* the kind of grassy ground she could happily run on. Both ‘takes’ were *mistakes*. The ‘meat’ was only a reflection and the ‘grass’ was only algae. In both cases the mistake was a shock to its canine subjects whose animal assumptions were challenged. They lost their meat and their footing, but in their evident perplexity they each found themselves in a unique position where they might gain a flash of basic *consciousness* concerning the difference between their assumption and reality. In this concrete experiential situation, that difference *matters* and hence acquires emotional *value*, even to a dog. During this actual occasion of experience (which of course involved a subject relating to its objects), an ‘inner world’ is as it were *peeled away* from an ‘outer world’ in the sense that what they took to be the outer world turned out to be precisely that: their take, and a mistake at that. Prior to that point, no distinction was drawn between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ because there was no *call* for such a distinction<sup>3</sup>.

But if ‘illusion’ in this sense is indeed decisive to what we might think of as the formation of our ‘inner worlds’, this is certainly not to say that it *defines* those worlds. On the contrary, most ‘takes’ of this kind are not mistakes, and indeed the mistake is the exception that proves the rule that usually solid looking green stuff *is* grass that can be happily walked on and usually something that looks like a juicy piece of meat *is* just that. Error and illusion are the prices we pay for having rather sophisticated psyches that can reach beyond the here-and-now of direct perception and conjure a future through imagination and a past through memory. To identify the inner world with illusion is to mistake the price for the object. Consider, for example, that what

---

<sup>3</sup> In William James’ radical empiricism, this notion of an experience prior to its bifurcation into a subject and object is called a *pure experience* (see Stenner, 2011).

is common to these kinds of experiences is that something in the present perceptual moment (in these cases the kind of percept that we call an image, i.e. an image of an expanse of green) is taken as a *basic symbol* for something else (grass) that *might* be available for purposes of causally efficacious activity in the very near future. The present image as such does not admit of error. It is a green expanse regardless of whether that green expanse turns out to be grass or algae. It is a flicker of brown and red regardless of whether that flicker turns out to be meat or simply a reflection of meat.

The possibility of error emerges when that pure perception of green is used as a symbol and thus *taken for* grass. In a basic and non-linguistic sense, the dog risked (unconsciously, of course) a *proposition*. If it were able to express it in language it would be something like ‘I propose that this green shape I see is grass’. This basic act of symbolic reference is core to what we mean by ‘the psychological’ or, rather loosely, the ‘inner world’. The subject in this case does not simply take the object as it finds it, but anticipates its nature, its future events, and its usefulness for doggy-purposes. The present is thus a leaping-off point for an anticipated future, and that leaping off point is of course intimately connected to memories concerning previous experiences with grassy terrain. Compared to human beings, the dog lives in the here and now of pure perception, but compared to less sophisticated organisms, it is capable of complex experiences that extend and sharpen the present by way of memories past and future anticipations. But this sophistication is bought at the price of the error of illusion: the immediate future may disappoint, and consciousness is born of such disappointments. But clearly the value of the appointments with the future which do not disappoint outweighs the costs of the occasional disappointments, just as the value of a genuinely enhanced familiarity with the world outweighs the fact that the world

thus 'known' has lost its innocence and is now acquainted with the original sin of illusion and error.

## **References**

Canguilhem, G. (1958) 'Qu'est-ce que la Psychologie?' *Revue de Metaphysique et de Morale*, 1, 12-25.

Craib, I. (1997) Social Constructionism as a Social Psychosis, *Sociology*, 31(1): 1-15.

Curt, B. (1994) *Textuality and Tectonics: Troubling social and psychological research*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Freud, S. (1938) *Totem and Taboo*, (Trans James Strachey) London: Penguin.

Freud, S. (1949) *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, (Trans James Strachey) London: The Hogarth Press.

Girard, R. (1978) *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, California: Stanford University Press.

Motzkau, J. (2009) Exploring the transdisciplinary trajectory of suggestibility, *Subjectivity*, 27, 172-194.

Stainton Rogers, R, Stenner, P, Gleeson, K, and Stainton Rogers, W. (1995) *Social Psychology: A critical agenda*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Stenner, P. (2005) 'An Outline of an Autopoietic Systems Approach to Emotion' *Cybernetics and Human Knowing*, 12 (4): 8-22.

Stenner, P. (2011) James and Whitehead: Assemblage and Systematization of a Deeply Empiricist Mosaic Philosophy. *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, 3 (1): 101-130.

Stenner, P. (2013) 'Foundation by Exclusion: Jealousy and envy'. In *Dialectic and Paradox: Configurations of the third in modernity*, edited by Bernhard Malkmus and Ian Cooper, Oxford: Lang.

Stenner, P. 2014a. 'Transdisciplinarity'. In *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology*, edited by Thomas Teo. Springer, New York, USA.

Stenner, P. in press, (2014b) A transdisciplinary psychosocial approach. In K. Slaney, J Martin and J Sugarman (Eds) *The Wiley Handbook of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology: Methods, Approaches and New Directions for Social Science*, New York: Wiley.