

The Nature of the Psychosocial: Debates from *Studies in the Psychosocial*

Stephen Frosh¹

There can be something arbitrary about titles that later, in a kind of après-coup, become significant. I remember sitting in a small meeting of dissident Birkbeck psychologists in 2000, debating what name we might give to our group in order to make it more prominent in the context of a Department of Psychology rapidly consolidating itself as a major player in the field of cognitive neuroscience. I can't recall now all the options we had (I think one was *Centre for Sociological Psychology*, another *Critical Psychology*), but the designation *Psychosocial Studies* was not immediately obvious. Now it is, and in retrospect it seems odd to ever have doubted it; but the fact that we were not sure is instructive, showing how not everything is strategic or well planned, how often we simply find ourselves doing something, making sense of it after the event.

This came to mind when preparing this talk, as I thought about the contingencies involved in developing the Palgrave series, *Studies in the Psychosocial*. Much changed between 2000 and the start of the series in 2013, including a much greater visibility of the idea of psychosocial studies and 'the psychosocial' in generally critical work (I certainly come across it often when reviewing articles and grant applications). But I think it is fair to say that psychosocial studies is still in a pre-disciplinary state, and maybe it is best it stays that way, as a 'transdisciplinary space'. There are disadvantages here, including dangers of incoherence and also political impotence in an environment in which people's careers might depend on locating themselves in

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recognisable and fundable academic structures; this new organisation, APS, is in part a response to these concerns. But there are advantages too: no-one has control over psychosocial studies; it is in principle an open and contested and hence democratic space; there can be freedom of thought without policing by orthodoxies and entrenched interests; and we can trawl back in time and across in space for the ideas and approaches that might enrich our work.

Studies in the Psychosocial is, I think, a successful series already, with a substantial number of very interesting titles either already published or imminent. However, I am not trying to advertise it here; I rather want to explore some of the issues that have arisen in the editorial group as we have developed the series, as I think these are significant for the field itself in the state of development that it currently is in. This is, in fact, at least the second talk arising out of the series, Peter Redman having given one in Brighton earlier this year. In that talk he explored questions such as the extent to which psychosocial studies is a new phenomenon; how psychoanalysis features in it; and what the defining features of the psychosocial might be. As we might hope, I am substantially in agreement with Peter, and particularly with one of his programmatic statements:

‘At the risk of stating the obvious, the trick would seem to be to balance or, perhaps, hold in tension a clear sense of what distinguishes a psychosocial study from modes of enquiry contiguous with it *and* a principled openness about how the psychosocial can best be understood. As always, holding these poles in tension is doubtless easier said than done. But it surely isn’t impossible either. It is, after all, not a million miles from the old adage, never marry your hypothesis.’

Still, this balance is not an easy one to maintain, especially when fundamental debates about what might or might not be ‘psychosocial’ remain in the air.

The following series definition appears on the publisher’s website². It was written following a meeting of the three series editors, Peter Redman, Wendy Hollway and myself, after a discussion which also included the Palgrave editor of the series.

Psychosocial Studies seeks to investigate the ways in which psychic and social processes demand to be understood as always implicated in each other, as mutually constitutive, co-produced, or abstracted levels of a single dialectical process. As such it can be understood as an interdisciplinary field in search of transdisciplinary objects of knowledge.

Psychosocial Studies is also distinguished by its emphasis on affect, the irrational and unconscious processes, often, but not necessarily, understood psychoanalytically.

Studies in the Psychosocial aims to foster the development of this field by publishing high quality and innovative monographs and edited collections. The series welcomes submissions from a range of theoretical perspectives and disciplinary orientations, including sociology, social and critical psychology, political science, postcolonial studies, feminist studies, queer studies, management and organization studies, cultural and media studies and psychoanalysis. However, in keeping with the inter- or transdisciplinary character of psychosocial analysis, books in the series will generally pass beyond their points of origin to generate concepts, understandings and forms of investigation that are distinctively psychosocial in character.

² <http://www.palgrave.com/page/detail/studies-in-the-psychosocial-peter-redman/?K=9780230308589>

This statement was also devised retrospectively and may not yet justify the *après-coup* experience of obvious intelligibility. Although we had guidance for the three series editors, we only thought to make a public statement when we found ourselves faced with a lively internal debate about what we meant by 'psychosocial studies' and specifically, whether some of the proposals and manuscripts we were receiving fitted this rubric. Where are the boundaries of this non-discipline? Is it a matter of self-definition – anything is psychosocial if the author claims it as such – or is there a set of general principles that we can sign up to and that will be recognised in our scholarly community, if we can identify what that is? Are we entitled to decide what we are willing to accept in 'our' series (issues of quality bracketed out, to the extent that this is possible) – after all, someone has to make decisions somewhere, and other people are perfectly entitled to set up their own psychosocial series, implementing their own versions of what they see as the appropriate canonical definitions of the field? As three people committed to the development of psychosocial studies, do we not have the right simply to assert our vision, and if others don't agree they can do the same elsewhere? Or is there a more serious problem with becoming 'gatekeepers' for psychosocial studies, both in whether we have the academic and intellectual credibility to do so (our knowledge is bound to be limited, and in our case is predominantly influenced by our experiences in academic psychology and sociology and in psychoanalysis) and in the way this mimics precisely the authoritarian disciplinary structures we are trying to resist? For both Wendy Hollway and me, it was the very material sense of being marginalised in the discipline of psychology that led to becoming a kind of 'refugee' looking for a new intellectual home; do we want to reproduce this within our new community? There is also a developmental concern: psychosocial studies is a contested space (we still can't even agree finally on the hyphen, and we have even debated whether psychosocial studies is a singular or

plural!), so imposing too tight a structure around it at this stage risks closing down debate and strangling the possibilities for growth. We do not yet know what should actually be in it; nor who exactly is the 'we' in this.

Let's look first at our definition of psychosocial studies itself, then at what we say about the series. We assert something definitive: 'Psychosocial Studies seeks to investigate the ways in which psychic and social processes demand to be understood as always implicated in each other, as mutually constitutive, co-produced, or abstracted levels of a single dialectical process.' It is possible that this is at a sufficient level of generality to be uncontroversial; at least, that was our intention – but of course, this vagueness means that it allows variant readings. For instance, does use of the phrase 'mutually constitutive, co-produced, or abstracted levels of a single dialectical process' mean we are taking a stand on the hyphen issue, so that we object to the idea of thinking separately about psychological or social processes and then examining the way they intersect with each other – which might rule out a lot of 'traditional' psychosocial work? And extending this, does it mean that, for example, the 'inner world' versus 'external world' vocabulary of much British School psychoanalysis which quite a number of UK psychosocial studies researchers find useful, is regarded as beyond the pale? The former might be within our intention, as we share a wish to differentiate between psychosocial studies as a transdisciplinary approach and traditional social work and social psychiatry that uses the term 'psychosocial' to refer to rehabilitation programmes and the like (though Peter argues in his Brighton talk that there may be more common ground than is often appreciated between these traditional forms and our more 'critical' mode of thinking). The latter, ruling out the adoption of a vocabulary of 'inner worlds', is not part of our aim, even if we might want to subject this vocabulary to scrutiny.

I have to admit that I am still struggling to understand the next sentence, '[psychosocial studies] can be understood as an interdisciplinary field in search of transdisciplinary objects of knowledge.' I think what we are attempting here is to describe a process of disciplinary emergence, in which we acknowledge that most authors will come from a specific disciplinary base (for instance, sociology or media studies) but will be using ideas from other disciplines (hence 'interdisciplinary') in order to produce forms of knowledge that have no disciplinary location ('transdisciplinary'). This is potentially quite a liberating idea, as it means that we can allow in studies that are rooted in an existing discipline but strive to push away from it. We have had to deal with this issue quite often, for example in relation to questions such as whether a piece of discursive social psychology is psychosocial, or where the boundary between straight psychoanalytic theory and psychosocial studies might fall. On the whole, what we have done here is to try to understand the way in which the author has defined psychosocial studies and examine whether she or he has made a case for linking this with our broad definition; and then we have looked at the final product to see if this psychosocial 'promise' has been kept. Is this sufficient? To follow my example, if someone writes in a Lacanian or object relational vein, both of which, it can be argued, locate the human subject in a heavily socialised terrain, are they automatically 'in' psychosocial studies or do they have to do something else? One author defended a manuscript on the grounds that the notion of 'extimacy' means that any Lacanian work is by its very nature psychosocial, and perhaps the same thing could be said about 'projective identification' or even, stretching things, 'discourse'. Our judgements here are contingent and converge with judgements of quality, and there is a very large grey area; but usually we want more than just the expression of a point of view that might be easily cast within another discipline.

The grey zone is extended by what the statement does next, which is to highlight what might be seen as ‘psychological’ elements of the psychosocial and then explicitly name psychoanalysis. ‘Psychosocial Studies is also distinguished by its emphasis on affect, the irrational and unconscious processes, often, but not necessarily, understood psychoanalytically.’ This sentence responds to a substantial debate within our editorial group: what is the place of psychoanalysis in psychosocial studies? I will not rehearse all the issues here, some of which have appeared in print, but note that whilst we are in agreement that psychosocial studies is not *defined* as having a psychoanalytic basis, all three of us are heavily involved in using psychoanalysis in our work and see it as a particularly valuable way of advancing psychosocial concerns. Although it is true to say that ‘the unconscious’ is potentially a broad notion, the reference to ‘unconscious processes’ not necessarily ‘understood psychoanalytically’ seems a bit paradoxical, suggesting that we might be slipping in a psychoanalytic requirement without acknowledging it fully. What, then, of work that has no psychoanalysis in it? For example, what if a researcher runs a focus group but does not include exploration of group dynamics in the analysis, or carries out an interview-based study that uses a standard qualitative methodology (e.g. grounded theory or narrative analysis) in a sensitive way, but does not interrogate the dynamics of the interview itself? More broadly, we are dealing here with the question of whether there are some fundamentals without which any study, however good it may be, is not a psychosocial study. There surely must be: after all, very few neuroscientists would call their work psychosocial, though there might be a point at which the application of neuropsychological ideas in a social setting would beckon to them and create problems for our categorisation system. But what are these *sine qua non*? Is there some essential *content* here, which we cannot do without, or only an *approach*? In the series, we have some

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very empirical texts where we have been concerned about the extent to which psychosocial theory has been used, and several very theoretical texts where we have wondered whether the provenance of the book is really social theory, or psychoanalytic theory, or politics or something else. In the end, we have taken most of these in after debates with the authors (though several proposals have been rejected on quality grounds) and the only completed book we have 'lost' so far has been one where the authors decided they would prefer the book to be labelled 'media studies'. Nevertheless, we recognise the possibility of incoherence in working this way.

We do, however, have a rule of thumb, which in short is that there has to be something extra that makes a book an example of psychosocial studies and not, for example, of critical social psychology or anthropology or gender studies. We say, 'books in the series will generally pass beyond their points of origin to generate concepts, understandings and forms of investigation that are distinctively psychosocial in character.' Our debate around specific proposals or final manuscripts is often around this: what is the added extra that makes this book psychosocial, and how can we know when we see it when we remain so uncertain about the boundaries of the psychosocial itself? In one of our discussions about a book that we did eventually take into the series, one of us wrote, 'I don't want the series to be closely associated with cultural theory with a twist of psychoanalysis.' In Peter Redman's earlier-referenced talk, he emphasised the 'depth' of analysis – or analysis of 'depth' – that is required for a psychosocial study, in each of its different realms. Thus,

...in seeking to investigate how the social is implicated in the psychological, psychosocial studies necessarily pay close attention to psychological and emotional states and view these states as lively and consequential, for psychological and social life as

well. To put this point in a different vocabulary, they take processes of subjectification seriously while seeking to avoid over-socialised accounts of subjectivity. At the same time, psychosocial studies have – or should have – an equal concern for the depth and range of *social* processes that are in play and help constitute the context or phenomenon in question. ... This implies a concern for phenomena over and above those arising from social interaction to include those belonging to large groups and social systems and structure.

I concur with this and note that whilst the notion of ‘depth’ might seem to imply psychoanalysis, the extension of the requirement to the social shows that this is not necessarily the case: what we are talking about is the mobilisation of theoretical and empirical strands to ensure that what we term ‘transdisciplinary objects of knowledge’ are continually invented in ways that demand the blurring of previous disciplinary boundaries. So no simple choice of psychoanalysis, or combination of cultural studies and psychoanalysis (or the ‘inflection’ of one with the other), or history and speculative psychobiography; always something that seeks to critique its base disciplines and find ways to interrogate its own conditions of emergence. This is a substantial requirement, and we have to be lenient with it at times; even the strongest books are likely only to achieve this level of critical engagement and transdisciplinary novelty from time to time.

To finish, here is a partial list of lessons learnt from the series to date.

1. There are lots of authors looking for somewhere to place books that don’t seem quite to fit in traditional categories; the psychosocial is a nice space for many of them. Some of these books are very long. Many of them reflect years of troubled reflection on what it means to be located in

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a marginal space, looking for a community that shares an author's dissatisfaction with normative social science. Unfortunately, this is not sufficient in itself to define a book as psychosocial (or to make it good).

2. Similarly, just because a book has 'psychological' and 'social' in it, it doesn't necessarily make it psychosocial.

3. It is very difficult to define in advance all the parameters of the psychosocial. It is easier to look at what authors produce and ask them to show how, by their lights, they have confronted the psychosocial domain. This often produces persuasive responses or useful revisions of the book, but it also means we can be faced with going back to authors expressing our uncertainty about whether they have really achieved this task.

4. It can be easier to write theoretically about psychosocial studies than to carry out empirical work. This may be partly a matter of access to funding.

5. Psychosocial studies draws heavily on psychoanalytic studies, but also on various modes of social and political theory. It is possible to distinguish between a book that is, for instance, psychoanalytic, and one that deals with material psychoanalytically but also qualifies as psychosocial by presenting a critical appreciation of the social structuring of the psychoanalytic subject. But whilst we can – and do – make this distinction, it is not always a clear one and we remain open to argument.

6. The combination of, and tension between, Foucauldian and psychoanalytic (especially Lacanian) theory remains active and productive in this field. In general, there is less bunker-like attachment to particular schools of thought than might have been the case a while ago, with a very visible move to a kind of critical eclecticism.

7. The disciplinary space of psychosocial studies is an expanding one, and maybe this is right for the current stage of its development. The range of work that might be psychosocial, even if we cannot be quite clear on what that means, seems inexhaustible. We are publishing books on apartheid, social violence, human rights, intergenerational transmission of identities and trauma, maternal becoming, psychoanalytic sociology, empirical psychosocial methodology and epistemology, narcissism, film and television viewing, the politics of sexuality, nationalism and patriarchy, and so on. We have single-authored and edited volumes, theoretical and empirical works; some which are geographically specific and others which are general; some which are historically oriented; some books that cross over between radically different perspectives. There is a postcolonial and queer theme emerging, but other volumes that are much closer to recognisable host disciplines (social psychology, sociology). Overall, there seems to be a genuine hunger for this new area, partly perhaps because it is so ill-defined, making it a space for imaginative appropriation. Even though we sometimes agonise that we might not know what we are doing, we hope to remain open to the creative possibilities of a loosely defined, slightly chaotic field of study, and not be afraid to take risks.