

Psychosocial challenges of building Psychosocial Studies: a response to Sasha Roseneil

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Foreword – *a note on the status of this write-up for the Journal of Psycho-Social Studies*

Before the APS launch event, I had the opportunity to read and reflect on Sasha's paper over several days. I made notes. I felt ambivalent about writing (typing) out a talk to be read, wanting to keep some spontaneity in my comments. On the occasion, as I sat at the front listening to Sasha's presentation, able from there to look at the whole audience, my imagination was caught by the facial and bodily expressions. There felt to be, for example, moments of tension followed by relieved laughter, moments that were collectively experienced. Watching this, I felt that the audience was enacting something that I wanted to draw attention to in my comments about a methodology for psychosocial studies. I decided to leave aside my notes and trust to the fact that the main themes were already embodied 'scenically'² in my experience of Sasha's presentation. An anecdote about Wilfred Bion's comment before he was due to speak at a conference emerged in my mind and I decided to tell this to the audience, to use it as a warrant for leaving aside my notes and extemporizing.

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² 'Scenic', 'an affective and embodied register of meaning' (Bereswill, Morgenroth and Redman, 2010, p. 225), references the psychosocial theory of Alfred Lorenzer, (see two special issues: *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* 2010 and *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 2012.) Its relevance to the psychosocial imagination is that 'imagination is scenic in its format: it inter-relates all informative, sensual and situated impressions in holistic images' (Salling Olesen, 2012, para 3).

Bion is reported to have said something along the lines of ‘I can hardly wait to hear what I am going to say’. The joke, of course, is that this is what we would say about others’ talks; about our own, we are supposed to know in advance. Bion, famously, was an advocate of ‘not knowing’ (Keats’ negative capability), in the sense of not closing knowledge down in advance of the live event (in the clinical context, he advocated a psychoanalytic stance ‘without memory or desire’). This open stance enables a fuller kind of knowing, ‘knowing of’, in contrast to ‘knowing about’ which uses thinking ‘to increase the learner’s store of knowledge without producing any change in himself’ (Spillius, 1988, p.157). I related this to the audience and explained (I hope) that experiencing Sasha’s presentation in “association” (in this room, framed by the purpose of this present launch day, linking with meanings coming from our history of the previous six year-old Psychosocial Studies Network) gave a particular affective weight and value to what she said. This was more than what I experienced reading it in advance and I want to try to do justice to that ‘more than’.

I did one other thing – also unplanned in advance – I suggested that we sit in silence for a minute, in order to allow time to reflect on how one felt, following that presentation: how were the affective flows during that presentation still registering in bodies. I shall explain below my methodological thinking behind this suggestion.

In what follows, I focus my discussion on Sasha's 'obstreperous' inner group, as an enactment of the psychosocial imagination, as a collective (as well as autobiographical) expression of an actual occasion³, that of taking the leadership of the new APS.

The experience of an obstreperous inner group

Sasha's performance (it was more animated than the word 'presentation' connotes) successfully enacted the specific experience of being in her position in launching this new learned society. By retaining the specifics, by communicating the affective freight of her experience, the audience was offered an occasion to experience something at more than an intellectual level, rather to be changed by it. This, according to Bion, is what is involved in 'learning from experience', something that happens when emotional experience - which in this context I think one can safely also call affect⁴ - is not alienated from the occasion. In my recent pursuit of a methodology for empirical psycho-social research⁵, I have documented at length the dual principle of knowing through noting the embodied affective change in oneself (the emotional experience) and ensuring opportunities to reflect on it, including in the company of others.

By animating her inner group activity, Sasha reminded me that thinking is not limited to the either/or case of being on your own or amongst physically present others, but that the collectivity (the Association) exists in our own imagination, if we afford it the mental space to emerge into

³ 'Actual occasion' comes from A.N. Whitehead, the relevance of whose process philosophy for psychosocial studies is set out by Paul Stenner (2008).

⁴ I see here the potential for dialogue between affect theory and psychoanalysis, each in their several manifestations, grounded by the analysis of particular examples.

⁵ Hollway, 2014, in press.

expression. If, collectively, we had not recognised the dilemmas that Sasha performed, I would not have witnessed⁶ the resonances of affect circulating as Sasha spoke. The range of what came through her imagination was vast, exemplifying the three principles shared (I agree) by the PSS community: historical, contextualised and specific. She mentioned the role of biology, the history of sociology and gender studies, academic and disciplinary power relations. She deftly, aptly and humourously ('we are investing in a business on an upward trajectory') used the conceptual resources of critical theory: late modernity (situated spatially), political economy, current debates about the politics of futurity and questions about collegial ethics. Specific cultural references abounded - Russell group, SPADs⁷, Pilates, Greenham, Miss Havisham, the REF, HSBC, Twitter accounts, free-riders, PPE⁸ boys, Oxbridge high table – each containing a socio-cultural world of shared meaning rooted in the actualities of the material and social. Whoever said the inner world was personal *as opposed to* social, or that imagination was *opposed to* reality? Banish the binaries! Sasha's inner group was also recognisably the outer group. It was a performance of a psycho-social imagination at the same time anchored in reality: collective *and* autobiographically inflected. The experience worked in between inner and outer; in what Winnicott called transitional space⁹ and Paul Hoggett (2008) has drawn attention to in the hyphen of psycho-social.

⁶ Bracha Ettinger's matrixial theory has an apposite neologism here, wit(h)nessing: 'witnessing while resonating with an Other in a trans-subjective encounter-event' (Ettinger, 2006a, p. 220).

⁷ Government Special Advisers.

⁸ PPE boys refers to those who graduate from Oxford University with a degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics. Wikipedia tells us that the PPE degree is traditionally read by those seeking a career in politics, public life and journalism.

⁹ 'My claim is that if there is a need for this double statement [individuals with an inside and an outside], there is also need for a triple one: the third part of the life of a human being, a part that we cannot ignore, is an intermediate

‘Both .. and .. and’ thinking is, for me, a sine qua non of the psycho-social; one that I felt characterised the whole launch day. We should not take for granted that Sasha had access to her disputatious inner group. To allow space for the uncomfortable feelings that arise in thinking those thoughts is neither easy nor common. Academics’ ideological attachment to certain positions – let’s say for example the critical taboo on biology in psychosocial studies, hopefully now receding – often makes for the comfort of certainty at the expense of opening up lines of thinking (the creation of mental space). ‘To sustain a thought is to continue to allow it to exert pressure upon us, to allow it access into other chambers of the mind, to lay no claim to the limits of its expandability in spite of having to take responsibility for its outcome’ (Sowa, 2002-3, p. 33). Sasha’s internal group helped her to think against the grain of a given line of thought. It is unsettling because you don’t know where it will end, but without it, imagination is banished and mental space shrinks.

Sasha risked a bevy of uncomfortable emotions: the possibility of failure involved in a new venture disliked by the disciplinary powers that be; potential disappointment; being uncool and passé; worry about what was the right or sensible thing to do (fear of ‘selling out’); risking career success and undermining her health by taking on this ‘unnecessary’ work load; the shame of feeling envy (X is pursuing career success not mired in petty admin); exposing herself to conflict (those schisms breathing down the neck while deciding on the speakers). She could also remind

area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. It is an area that is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated’ (Winnicott, 2005[1971], p. 3).

herself of a set of principles guiding the work: collective over self-interest; commons not disciplinary boundaries; the freedoms of not joining the mainstreams; the importance of strengthening our institutional base. And the evidence of doing the right thing: a full house, sold out, the British Library location. In her passing reference to ‘more unitary moments’, she recognizes not only the need for integration but the inevitable dynamics of conflict and unity in the relentless ‘becoming’ that new experiences impose upon us.

No wonder there was a big SIGH (written in capitals on Sasha’s script at the end of part one). I can hear it now, Sasha’s particular inflection, resonating in me when I let in those difficult emotions and think about our new project with the help of the mental space she shares with us.

In one’s ‘right mind’

To end with, I want to think about the idea of ‘right mind’ in Sasha’s framing question ‘why would anyone in her *right mind* throw in her lot with Psychosocial Studies’ and how it contains but is more than that psycho-social multitude which she so successfully animates. I like the idea of right mind: it is a way of conceptualising ethical subjectivity within a specific, challenging, context. It gestures to many crucial debates in Psychosocial Studies: integration and fragmentation/multiplicity, affect and embodiment in the unthought known, the pernicious binary of individual/psychological versus social/sociological, the central but not determining role of reality in purposive action and, last but not least, how we keep faith with an ethico-politics that sometimes feels hopeless faced with a compelling socio-political analysis of our situation.

Let me try and unpack this through Sasha's prologue, through the guiding principle that each personality is a company of many, a composite structure¹⁰. It blows apart the binary of self/personality/ individual/ the psychological as other than the social. It makes subjectivity more than interpersonal (relational), because each person's 'life of one's own' consists of an ongoing stream of experiences, actual occasions. For me the word 'actual' is important because it references a succession of more or less intransigent realities with which we must come to terms: 'The material world is critical to our construction of subjectivity ... we simultaneously impose our weight upon it and surrender to its unyielding aspects' (Gentile, 2008, p. 549). Sasha's inner dialogue was bursting with actual occasions and their material features – examples of people, objects, structures, technologies, history, discourses, economy (this list moves to a more abstract conceptual level in order to give an overview). Crucially, these 'external' factors (which always already have inner resonances) do not add up to a constructed subjectivity. In addition to personal history, every actual occasion is entangled with affect (Bion's raw emotional experience), provoking desire and anxiety. What gets processed – able to be thought about – and what is too painful or frustrating and gets registered traumatically on the body (acted out but inaccessible)? What are the conditions that make the difference? The containment of other minds and the containing structures of institutions, groups and language categories; these matter for finding one's right mind (provisionally but consistently) and linking with what might otherwise remain split off.

¹⁰ I have come across two other expressions of Joan Rivière's Kleinian-inspired statement here. Roger Money-Kyrle, another British psychoanalyst writing in that fertile decade of the 1950s, said 'there is a continual unconscious wandering of other personalities into ourselves' (cited in Norman Brown, 1966, pp. 146-7). When I used the Rivière quote in a public talk, a member of the audience told me afterwards that the idea came from the bible – Romans and Ephesians, according to an on-line search.

All this contributes to our capacities to act in communal, ethico-political ways and to make changes despite not knowing if and how they will survive in the future. Underpinning ‘service’, though, we can often find pleasure and satisfaction, even if there are times when it is hard to find: the launch full house, the good vibes and the excellence of British Library provision. We can all contribute by recognising what has been achieved, refraining from carping and pulling our weight. This is helped by ‘com-passion’; feeling with others and being affected by the actual occasions that have led up to, and made up, the event. That way the Association offers future meaningful experiences and supports us in the less satisfying areas of academic and professional life.

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