

BOOK REVIEW

Psychosocial Studies: An Introduction

Kath Woodward, London: Routledge, 2016

Reviewed by Ashley R. Bullard

The development of a strand of scholarship which brings together the psyche and the social under the rubric of the psychosocial has continued to gather pace over the last decade or so. The Association of Psychosocial Studies has become a learned society. New academic courses and departments with the term in its title are coming into fruition. Work in the area has continued to increase along with the numbers of people using the theories, insights, and methods to produce new and innovative work. And, of course, a journal has been established dedicated to its development.

It is an indication of the area's infancy that debates as to its status as a discipline, sub-discipline, or as to whether it's simply 'inter-disciplinary' still rumble on. Another sign is the lack of a comprehensive introduction to the field. It is within this context that Kath Woodward's book, *Psychosocial Studies: An Introduction*, breaks ground and provides a first point of call for new people with an interest in, or those simply wanting a one-stop location for understanding, the field.

Woodward gives us a synoptic overview of the field of Psychosocial Studies. Chapter 2, *Ideas*, introduces us to the varying attempts that social theorists have had at conceptualising the relationship between the psyche and the social, and her attempts to avoid determinism of one towards the other. Here we are introduced to the ideas of psychoanalysis, the unconscious, feminism (and its critiques of psychoanalysis), Butler, object relations, Marxism, and the Frankfurt school of thought. All have come to understand the relationship between the personal and the social in different ways. These perspectives are not directly psychosocial, but demonstrate the tradition of questioning the relationship between the social and the personal, which is a central concern of

psychosocial studies.

Chapter 3, *Methodologies*, discusses the diminishing distinction between theory and method in psychosocial studies; in particular, the importance placed upon narratives. We are introduced to free association narrative interviewing, and Biographical-Narrative-Interpretive-Method, the former of which is a masterful piece on how to weave the theory of psychosocial into methods seamlessly. In addition to these methods, the use of creative thinking, and textual analysis are considered, along with the importance of the reflexivity of the researcher and accounting for their own psychosocial subjectivity.

It is within chapter 4, *Selves*, that we turn to one of the more interesting and distinctive aspects of a psychosocial approach. Here the often interchangeable terms of identity, subjectivity, and self are discussed, giving a historical tour of theories of how we come to have a self. What could present as an object of confusion here is that we are introduced to purely developmental theories, in particular psychoanalysis, which discuss how we come to understand ourselves as 'selves'. This feels far too restrictive in scope. The chapter could have benefited from following the same format as chapter 2 and introducing us to other alternative theories to the singular unified internal self. Alternatively, if it was to show particularly psychosocial approaches to theories of the self, it could have benefited from a more explicit relating to the field.

From chapters 6, *Intimacies*, through to chapter 9, *Politics*, we are brought through more empirical cases. Here we are shown areas of interest that have been pursued by psychosocial researchers. Woodward focuses on how the emotions are made into objects of study, as things that we can think through to understand the linkages of the personal and the social, and how this can be productive. Woodward's discussion on *Trauma*, chapter 8, shows how we think through personal and collective feeling from macro and micro experiences. These cases, as with the more theoretical elements in earlier chapters, give us the broad brush strokes of a psychosocial approach.

Woodward writes in a very accessible manner, eschewing the opaque terminology and

dense explanations that can obscure meaning whilst giving a veneer of high theory. Boldening of key words in the *Introduction* and providing a glossary will be particularly useful for those who may be completely new to the field and might be unaware of the specificity and nuance of terms with common everyday meanings and usage. This keeps the barrier to entry low.

However, I feel that the book informs more about psychoanalysis and feminism than psychosocial studies. This is not a problem in itself; psychosocial studies clearly has an intellectual debt to these two fields which at times have come up against one another and at others have found productive collaboration. What I find problematic is that *how* these fields have influenced psychosocial studies is noticeably absent within this *Introduction*. The relations between and within these fields are not explained to the reader, often leaving us with the passing statement to the effect of ‘these ideas have been influential within psychosocial studies’.

This could have been addressed with a discussion over what, precisely, the psychosocial *is*. Apart from an early explanation that it is about the social and the psyche being at play in one another and a desire to explain the liminal space between the two, the psychosocial is left rather without conceptualisation. Is it an object? Something that we can identify as ‘psychosocial’, whilst others are merely social, psycho, or something else completely? A merging of two intellectual disciplines? The application of old disciplines into new areas? A commitment to asking particular questions in particular ways and developing particular types of answers? A paradigm? I would have liked to see answers to these questions explored.

Woodward is sensitive to the potential conflicts that can emerge from trying to define a field still unsettled and characterized by competing interpretations. In this she has tried to give broad strokes around the influences of psychosocial studies and work emerging within the field. This desire to not be legislative is understandable and commendable. However, I feel that Psychosocial studies is in need of a solid introductory text that can provide an overview of the antecedents, intellectual history, the debates, conversations,

and ruptures that have made it what it is. With this in mind, I would have liked to see Woodward commit more forcefully to a delimiting of the field as she understands it.