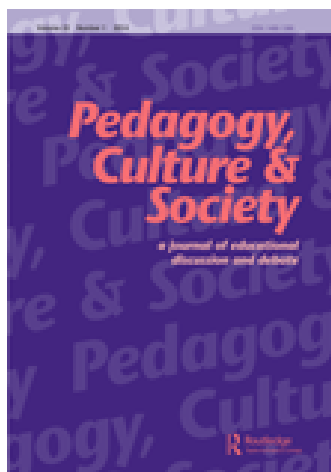


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## Explorations in knowing: thinking psychosocially about legitimacy

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In this paper, we look at what engaging with psychoanalysis, through psychosocial accounts of subjectivity, has contributed to our struggles for legitimacy and security within our ways of knowing. The psychosocial, with its insistence on the unconscious and the irrational, features as both a source of security and of insecurity. We use three examples drawn from our own empirical research to explore the entanglement of the researcher with the researched and how this can offer a re-imagined sense of legitimacy for our work. In elaborating our argument, we discuss our experiences of ‘being captured’ by data and participants, and of negotiating the ethics of analysing participants’ accounts.

**Keywords:** psychosocial; methodology; epistemology; ethics; subjectivity

### Introduction

As the Brunel Education Theory Reading Group, we have been engaging with writings that offer perspectives on the relationship between structure and agency. In particular, we have become interested in psychosocial accounts of ‘identity’, subjectivity and ‘voice’. Poststructuralist accounts of subjectivity have resonated most with us in our discussions, although we have struggled to come to terms with and sometimes overcome the essentialist assumptions about meaning and knowledge in some everyday and academic discourses (Davies and Petersen 2004; Henriques et al. 1998; Rose 1989). We are grappling with theories that offer lenses through which to interpret our research, in relation to the objects and subjects of our studies, and our own identities as researchers. As a group, we have posed questions about: *Ontology* – what is psychosocial being? *Epistemology* – how and what can we know and what are the limits to our knowledge and knowing? *Methodology* – what means of knowledge construction can or should we use? *Ethics* – in ‘reading’ our participants’ narratives, to what degree do we impose our meanings over theirs? Running through our conversations are questions about legitimacy and processes of legitimation – of our-selves, our research and this paper itself. It is these questions on which

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we focus here, looking specifically at how engaging with the psychoanalytic within psychosocial frameworks can help us to explore them. So, while there are differences in our positions, we came to a collective voice built within the Theory Reading Group activities and extended through this interactive writing process.

Some of these questions are addressed by theoretical perspectives under the umbrella of poststructuralism. We welcomed the poststructuralist acknowledgment of the multiple codings and meanings in texts, thus including both the structural and the personal. It also acknowledges that all human knowledge consists of disciplined narratives with their own legitimization criteria, challenging universal standards (Lyotard 1984). But poststructuralism does not provide us with adequately articulated conceptions of ‘identity’ or subjectivity. The way subject positions are called up within it has been termed the ‘jukebox’ theory of identity (Wetherell 2012, 122), failing to address how people come to take up one position rather than another. Theorists using psychoanalysis provide ways of exploring how people become drawn to some discourses rather than others (e.g. Henriques et al. 1998; Walkerdine 1997).

This is why psychosocial approaches appeal to us. As Bibby (2011, 9) says ‘we are psychosocial beings ... to study either sociology or psychology ... is a form of splitting and misses the ways in which the internal and the external, the private and public, the individual and the social are deeply mutually implicated’. In addition, psychosocial approaches acknowledge the central role of the unconscious in supplying human desires, motives and actions that follow ‘irrational’ logics, different from the dominant logic of reason. As Butler (1997, 86) argues, the psyche ‘is precisely what exceeds the imprisoning effects of the discursive demands to inhabit a coherent identity, to become a coherent subject’. Our idea of unconscious is a socially embedded one, in which ‘psychic processes form a central component of how social and cultural fantasies work’ and through which the discursive environment becomes a ‘melting pot of psychical conditions of possibility’ (Walkerdine 1997, 184–5). However, we still have a shared ambivalence about the unconscious. As something that is fundamentally unknowable, how can we legitimately include it in our research except as something negative – the dark absence that surrounds our lit-up domains of knowledge?

Despite such doubts, we were captured by the theme of the 2012 Psychosocial Studies Network Conference (which was the point of origin of this special issue) – connected to our shared readings – and by each other – exploring the relationship between the social and the individual – and the need to think both together. But we had concerns about our own legitimacy within the space: engaging in psychosocial thinking without a psychoanalytic background. We still have those concerns. Here we are picking up on them in relation to one set of questions posed at the Conference: Do we need the authority of legitimised institutions and regularised methods to

build secure knowledge? What might it mean to build insecure edifices of knowledge?

Articulating the psycho and the social together is the basis for our discussions. Our understandings of legitimacy are through discourse, knowledge/power and subjectivity in a psychosocial sense. By discourse we mean not only all the semiotic forms of representation and communication entailed, but also the illocutionary force of language that enacts power, makes positions available/unavailable, and socially and psychologically positions speakers and listeners. We are each aware that the social world is saturated with powerful formations of knowledge that colonise individual and institutional identities. Some knowledge emerges as legitimised and authoritative; other knowledge is resisted or repressed. Thus, we are aware that showing the personal in our research reports is risky and can lead to struggles over what is acceptable as legitimate knowledge for publication. But even this liberalisation of our narratives involves a further, hidden repression of the personal. Several of us are suffering with work-induced stress and overtiredness as we write this paper. We are working in the English university context, under the weight of Ofsted inspections of Initial Teacher Education, the Research Excellence Framework that audits research outputs, and other forms of surveillance, 'accountability' and control. Being rendered silent by the weight of an institution that demands superhuman workloads and outputs is not a legitimate topic for discussion (rare exceptions are the papers by Davies and Peterson [2004] and Sparkes [2007]). Despite well-established psychological research that excess pressure and stress kill creativity, the knowledge monster demands to be fed.

As a group, we draw on our own histories and understandings in discussing and responding to our shared readings; we identify how these feed into the examples in this paper below. Engaging in reflexive research foregrounds issues of our-selves as knowers and experts. How do our subjectivities shape our research, and how aware are we of this? How confident are we entitled to be about our interpretations of both our readings and our data? What insecurities emerge around the limits of our knowledge? We each have different positions, as academics and human beings, and different narratives about our-selves. We each have allegiances to different professional and personal communities, and seeing ourselves as central or, more often peripheral, within them, has a significant impact on our perceptions of the security of our knowing.

To keep silent about our own active engagement in our research is to sacrifice honesty about the limits of our knowing in a quest for spurious authority and objectivity. It is to suppress doubts and anxieties about the legitimacy of the stories we tell and our right to tell them. Protocols of academic publication often demand the depersonalisation and objectification of our stories but here we let the presence of the researcher – with her self-awareness, doubts and assumptions – show through.

### About us and our contributions

Paul is the most experienced academic in the group and feels that he is viewed as a reservoir of knowledge by the others. He has self-doubts about the legitimacy of his positioning as a philosophical expert within the group and within mathematics education circles. However, he is excited by new theories and ideas, and enjoys discussing and sharing them with the reading group, describing what he gains as ‘intellectual entertainment’. The discussions help him to question his own long-held assumptions and reframe his understandings of issues. The idea of inserting oneself into a research narrative, as here, appeals as a way of making reporting more honest and self-aware. A central theme in Paul’s work has been to question the received view of mathematics as infallibly certain. A psychosocial perspective enables him to see that the assertion of absolutism in mathematics is not merely a rationally held position, but a defence against the threat of the unbearable knowledge that mathematics, like all other knowledge, is irrational, fallible and socially constructed (Walkerdine 1988).

Geeta was drawn to the psychosocial through an interest in the embodied self and her narrative study with 12 ‘successful’ South Asian girls (Ludhra and Chappell 2011). The interactional aspects of her fieldwork acted as a catalyst for revisiting ‘girlhood ghosts’ and entering the ‘darker’ areas of the psyche (Walkerdine, Melody, and Lucey 2003). Initially, Geeta felt uncomfortable about writing the self into her research, particularly within the dominant research culture where legitimacy and secure knowledge are read in ways that exclude the personal. In the first section of this paper, we will draw on her experiences to discuss the psychological impact of repression, and learning what not to say (Billig 2006). We will discuss the process of becoming a different type of researcher – one that feels more ‘ontologically secure’ (Laing 1960) and acknowledges the researcher’s own subjectivities – through entering particular research spaces that provide opportunities for ‘breathing’ and ‘thinking’ beyond discursive accounts. Finally, we will discuss particular episodes of ‘being captured’ by research participants whose experiences connect with aspects of the researcher’s life. Being captured is an affective response to data described by MacLure (2013), who invokes us to spend more time with those data ‘hot spots’ which ‘glow’ as we engage in fieldwork and analysis.

Anne is concerned with developing knowledge about teachers’ experiences of professional learning through a sociological approach. From her experiences of working in school, she had felt that teachers were ‘missing persons’ in both policy and practice (Evans 1999), which she sought to address through her methodology. Her key methodological concern was to understand the teacher’s narrated experiences and the meanings they made of these (Craib 2001; MacLure 1993). In the second section of this paper, we will share data from one of the teachers, whom Anne has called Nell, to

illustrate the way in which the research process appeared to have ‘worked’ and the subsequent methodological disruption that resulted following discussions within the Theory Reading Group. The exploration of psychosocial, and specifically psychoanalytic, ideas prompted a way of looking at the analysis differently (MacLure 2006). Taking account of possible psychosocial readings of both process and data troubled Anne by posing a challenge to the legitimacy that could be claimed (Bibby 2009; Henriques et al. 1998).

After some ‘identity work’, Heather has positioned herself as a sociologist of education. She is drawn to psychoanalytic ideas for what they offer to her thinking about ‘agency’ and, in particular, for how they offer ‘thought experiments’ that have the potential to move her to other than ‘commonsense’ understandings. For example, she has argued that they can challenge us to see ignorance as an active refusal of knowledge rather than as a passive, negative state (Mendick 2006): ‘in this question, the desire for ignorance is performative rather than cognitive. It is indicative of the incapacity – or the unwillingness – to acknowledge one’s own implication in the material studied’ (Luhmann 1998, 149). In the third section, we will discuss Heather’s analysis of ‘someone else’s data’. We will explore how she ‘was captured’ by one participant, whom she has called Lola, and how this capturing can offer a form of legitimacy. We also use Heather’s analysis of Lola to raise some tensions that we experience between psychoanalytic and sociological explanations within the psychosocial.

Although we have written this paper in a single voice, there are tensions between these accounts. In particular, Geeta’s sense of ‘ontological security’ contrasts with Anne and Heather working in parallel with two different interpretations.

### **Becoming ‘legitimate’ and feeling ‘secure’: acknowledging the unconscious**

In this section, we will discuss how psychosocial approaches can offer necessary alternatives to objectivity as a means of gaining legitimacy and security in our knowing. We do this through exploring Geeta’s changing relationship to her narrative research with 12 academically ‘successful’ South Asian girls. When Geeta began her study, the routine completion of the university ethics form did not engage her in the ‘deeper’ psychological difficulties associated with becoming tangled in ‘herstory’. But the processes involved made this inevitable (Ludhra 2011; Ludhra and Chappell 2011). At times, resurrecting ‘girlhood ghosts’ felt painful and emotionally overwhelming, and she felt a desire to ‘put a lid’ on them. These emotional engagements with her data provoked the following reactions from some senior academic others: ‘That’s contamination!’; ‘Beware of falling into that trap – it’s risky!’; ‘You could lose respect for writing like that’. These



discursive utterances were embodied, and made Geeta feel apprehensive and insecure about asserting the contribution to knowledge that emerged from her subjective, more insecure ways of knowing.

Skeggs (1997) writes powerfully about white working-class women's negotiations of respectability through dress, voice, talk and social life generally. In similar ways, Geeta, in attempting to become academically 'respectable', learned to repress parts of her-self. We can understand this in two ways. First, we draw on our collective reading of Billig's (2006) re-interpretation of Freudian repression. Billig acknowledges the importance of what is unsaid, but rejects Freud's idea of unconscious repression, adapting repression from something that is 'psychic', 'ghostly' and 'hidden', to 'an activity that is constituted within everyday language' (22). Billig's adaptation usefully focuses on the discursive processes through which repression happens, where language is both expressive and repressive. He draws our attention to the discursive process of 'learning to repress' within dominant cultures (22). This social behaviour serves to 'other' individuals, potentially making them feel 'inferior' or 'insecure' about their knowledge contributions. It also serves to 'other' some ways of knowing in preference for those that work alongside dominant discourses.

Our collective discussion of Billig helped us to understand the processes through which 'objectivity', 'elimination of bias' and 'uncontaminated data' have become dominant goals within educational research. However, his ideas did not seem enough to encompass what happens when our own repressed experiences are ignited through research interactions. So, in a move to which we imagine Billig would object, we supplement his discursive conception of repression with a psychic one (Frosh 2001).

The critical utterances mentioned above were tied to Geeta's institutional position and led her to believe that it was wrong to write or publicly discuss the self within particular spaces as it could challenge her position as a secure, legitimate and respectable academic. These complex emotions of 'unleashing' repressed experiences – whilst not knowing what to do with them when they were 'out in the open' – complicated her readings of the data. This made it feel dense, cloudy and difficult to analyse, as she got involved in 'conversations' with her participants, which we discuss later through the stories of Rohini and Maheera. This denseness slowed her progress and was experienced through a constant weighted feeling in the body and mind. Within what felt like a mess, Geeta felt a constant desire to de-tangle, almost to decontaminate the data, by removing any imprints of the self. These messages, about the need to decontaminate were being conveyed by those who shared dominant research positions; so Geeta learned to hold back and write apprehensively, with caution, 'hiding' those more insecure areas of experience. This proved an impossible task, and so began a quest to understand the unreasonable, the unconscious and unsaid (Frosh 2001). We have all had similar experiences to Geeta, and other work supports the



assertion that people's lives are 'fraught with uncertainties, anxieties and puzzles' (Craib 2001, 72). The question lies in how individuals professionally manage those uncertainties of inner lives when academic structures and practices encourage us to *repress*, rather than *express*.

Engaging with the past through writing in her research journal, and through discussions with significant others (her husband and a few close friends), felt therapeutic and emancipatory (hooks 1996; Holloway, Lucey, and Phoenix 2007). This suggests the relationality of legitimacy and how it is negotiated within diverse communities. For Geeta, it was the start of a journey where she actively sought research spaces and academics (through collaborative writing experiences like this paper) that opened up avenues for her own subjectivity and expressive thinking. Geeta (with Anne) joined the British Sociological Association Auto/Biography Study Group. This is a small, yet highly experienced, group of researchers who value narrative research and different ways of thinking and reflecting on their-selves. Their annual conference provided an innovative platform for experimenting in these areas. Geeta presented there (Ludhra and Chappell 2010; Ludhra 2011, 2012) and the group have led her towards literature that opened up her 'sociological imagination' (Wright Mills 1959). Like Bibby (2011), Geeta found herself feeling dissatisfied with theories from educational and sociological literatures alone, as the discursive and structural elements restricted her explanations of experience (Frosh 2001).

Geeta engaged in discussions with Brunel youth work colleagues and they directed her reading towards feminist work, particularly literature that acknowledged psychosocial dimensions (e.g. Walkerdine, Melody, and Lucey 2003). Geeta was particularly drawn to the work of Black feminists and the ways in which they wrote and spoke with honesty, conviction and openness (Bhopal 2010; hooks 1996; Maylor 2009; Mirza 2009, 2013). She met some of them in person, and saw their work as brave, yet secure. They gave her confidence to write with greater authority. These Black feminist writers have discussed theory in ways which moved beyond sociological meanings of structure, gendered oppression and patriarchy, to incorporate 'embodied intersectionality' and deeper psychological experiences (Mirza 2013, 5; see also Ahmed 2009; Maylor and Williams 2011).

As signposted in the introduction, as four authors, we are part of the Brunel Theory Reading Group. Our monthly discussions have provided a critical, yet 'safe' space for being creative and experimenting. Both Geeta and Anne came together before the group formed, through their methodological connectedness in narrative research. They started to write together and provided mutual moral and psychological support (Ludhra and Chappell 2011). These and many others have provided an enhanced sense of legitimacy about writing about those more ethically challenging areas of research (Rogers and Ludhra 2011). These collaborations led Geeta towards

acknowledging her own subjective identifications with her participants, and how she felt herself ‘being captured’ by two of them.

Maheera and Rohini were catalytic in igniting aspects of Geeta’s girlhood. They were of Muslim religious background and grounded in Islam in very different ways – Maheera seeing it as a ‘supportive and colourful religion’, whereas Rohini compared it to a ‘culture knife’ and ‘poison’, depicting it as some oppressive being. In very different manners, they (like Geeta) discussed notions of respectability, doing the ‘right’ thing for others, struggle and sacrifice – aspects that Geeta could relate to, although she had never felt grounded in religion. Both girls aspired to become lawyers, and discussed their desire to ‘fight for justice’ and equality; interestingly, Geeta perceived them both as suffering from particular injustices. The fundamental difference between the girls was how they perceived and articulated aspects of their gendered and religio-cultural subjectivities.

Geeta identified with Rohini and Maheera in multiple ways: they evoked feelings of pity and worry, and a genuine (maternal) concern for their possible futures, particularly how they would manage their academic and career choices, alongside being successful in the extended family and community. She admired their strong work ethic, stamina and desire to become successful in challenging circumstances; Geeta’s ‘success journey’ mirrored aspects of their desires and experiences. Like Geeta’s girlhood, both girls carried heavy household responsibilities – both practical and psychological. They were expected to have ‘arranged marriages’ within ‘traditional’ Islamic families. Rohini was a resistor, challenger and questioner – she would get angry, frustrated and annoyed when she saw injustice or inequality, but she said that she only shared these emotions with Geeta. While vocal and authoritative in the school and research contexts, at home she described embodying these feelings in silent psychological ways, banking them for the right moment – when, as she put it, she would possibly ‘explode’.

In contrast, Maheera conveyed a spiritual sense of calmness to Geeta, and she seemed to embrace aspects of her religion, culture and family in very positive ways. She described the carer role that she adopted for her sick father and younger siblings (particularly her new baby brother), as something that she enjoyed, and from which she gained satisfaction. Aspects of this evoked pity in Geeta, yet made her feel angry too, as she sensed that Maheera could achieve so much more academically, if she was given the time and space to do so. But who was Geeta to comment on either of them? Yet, the fact that she had once travelled their roads, and been accepting of injustice herself, seemed to offer her a particular type of legitimacy through entanglement, rather than contamination. Maheera reminded Geeta of her pre-marital and early married years of womanhood. In contrast, Geeta connected to the anger of Rohini, who reminded her of her later married years of psychologically challenging and resisting particular cultural structures and norms. She found that her research journal began

to include these personal evocations and records of her emotions, through interacting and reflecting on the girls in her study.

Another fundamental shared experience with both girls relates to feelings of having/being a girl, and the inequalities associated with facets of girlhood. Rohini talked openly about the responsibility associated with being the older sister to two ‘spoiled’ brothers and a traditional father. She talked at length about her lack of status in the family. Maheera spoke adoringly of her baby brother being born after two teenage sisters, and the joy of having a son in the family for her parents. There was an absolute adoration of this son/brother. This desire for a boy was something to which Geeta could relate as she had embodied and repressed particular messages from more authoritative others within her family after the birth of her two daughters. This parallels how she had resisted writing to suit authoritative others in the academic space; she resisted living her life for authoritative others in the family, simply to suit cultural expectations.

Geeta’s story suggests the potential of psychosocial approaches for developing a sense of legitimacy within the educational research community. It shows how they opened up a space to explore the irrational that exceeds the discursive. Anne’s story, in the next section, describes her contrasting experience, in which thinking psychosocially disrupted her nascent understanding of the legitimacy of her re-presentations of her participants.

### **Methodological legitimacy: a self-fulfilling prophecy?**

In this section, we consider the extent to which participants can be understood to recognise themselves through particular research processes, and the potential for a researcher’s desires to become self-fulfilling (Henriques 1998; Walkerdine 1988). If the individual is understood as ‘neither totally powerful or powerless but fragmentary and positioned and repositioned from one moment to the next’ (Henriques et al. 1998, 225), what can be known and knowable about our participants? How do we address this question when we have a significant sense of personal responsibility to the research process, and accountability to our participants from first contact through every subsequent stage (Andrews 2007)? We explore these questions through Anne’s study with teachers. We begin by detailing her methodology to give a sense of how this responsibility was enacted and the depth of the disruption that the psychosocial can bring.

Anne was committed to finding an ‘alternative’ methodology to generate knowledge about teachers’ understandings of their professional learning. In response to the neoliberal policy climate and the ‘missing persons’ in policy and practice (Evans 1999), the key challenge of the research process was for her to be able to explore ‘the relationship between the state, the ideologies of professionalism, and lived interiority’ (Hey and Bradford 2004, 693). This was a project arising both from Anne’s own experience as a

teacher in a secondary school and her theoretical interest in the substantive concern. On the basis of the policy context and the literature, Anne was concerned to avoid a reduction of the teacher-participants' experiences. This deep commitment to reflexivity about the philosophical and ethical stance of the researcher is shared by each of us in slightly different ways. In Anne's case it raised a crucial methodological question about the spaces we can create for our participants' self-analysis and how we can reflect these in our co-constructed re-presentations of them.

Anne's intention in undertaking three research conversations with each of her participants at fortnightly intervals over a six-week period was to facilitate narrative accounts of experience and meaning making (MacLure 1993). In order to focus the participants on the meaning they made of their experiences, they were given an audio-recording and written transcript of the previous conversation and invited to consider it before meeting to talk further. Each conversation was led by their reflections on the previous conversation(s) (Ludhra and Chappell 2011).

This attempt to enact a deep ethical commitment brought with it anxieties and fears about the legitimacy of working with an untried process. However, as Anne spent time engaged in the conversations, she felt that the extent to which the participants were able, or perhaps enabled, to talk and explain themselves was significant and began to feel a new-found confidence in the process and its potential.

One such example comes from Nell, who offered an account that suggested she understood herself in a very specific way as being boring. This was apparent from the outset of the first conversation when she said 'Yeah, I'm just worried about boring you like I said'. When she was thanked at the end of the conversation with a comment from Anne that 'it had been really interesting', she responded with 'Liar'. At this stage in the research, Nell's identification of herself as boring was interpreted as being offered unreflexively. In the second conversation, she began to narrate her thoughts when commenting on listening to the transcript of the first. She said 'obviously last week chatting through, that was alright, obviously I did, I was worried about being boring'. Later in that conversation she returned to her understanding of herself when she asked Anne, 'are you bored yet?' Subsequently, she went on to offer an account of the way in which she understood herself to have chosen a particular presentation of the self. This started to pose questions about the extent to which she sought to offer an explanation for some of the content of the previous conversation:

I started, at university I started a bit of a nasty habit of being quite self-deprecating and slightly putting yourself down so nobody else had the opportunity to, so I'd rather ... Do it to yourself than you know have people go 'oh God, you know, she's crap at that'. I'd ra- ..., I'd much rather be open and then people have nothing to ... But then the down side of that is it sometimes gets too much and you bash yourself into the ground.

She provided a context for her concerns about being boring by referring to an encounter that she felt was significant to her understanding of herself:

going back to school really, secondary school, I wouldn't say I was bullied *per se*, but I had a five-week window probably, five or six weeks in my life where I was bullied by one particular girl who is actually a very good friend of mine now, we, but it was because of sport, and I found that really hard, because I went swimming after school every day, I was boring, and that idea of being boring has definitely stayed with me. So I think as a key moment or moments, that one person in terms of personality and how you worry about things, she definitely had an impact ... Yeah, I mean you know as a teenager who liked sport it was hard because she used to tell us off, this girl ... you know for trying in PE [physical education] and stuff, and it was just ridiculous, and so you know it takes a while for you to actually become your own person and go, actually no I do like PE, I actually want to teach it! So sort of stick you really! I like sport, take it or leave it really.

Nell subsequently explained how this particular girl had remained part of her life and offered a brief insight into their conversation about the encounter. She shared her interpretation of the response of the other girl and connected this to her reflections at this stage in her life:

But all of those things around being a girl and a teenager and the pressures to conform are so, so true I think. I have given her lots of abuse since, over the years! 'You've ruined me! A wonder I'm still living and breathing.' ... She just gets really embarrassed and says 'oh I don't know what I was thinking, you know, mm you know, it was just teenager whatnot, we were only 12 or so, so it wasn't.' ... And she did it to other people as well, it was you know, yeah, alpha female pushing her weight around on everybody else and you know power struggles and whatever, all of that.

Nell reflected on the issue of being perceived as boring and the impact she feels it has had on her view of life and teaching:

it's probably relevant to my career and such but it's relevant to my life ... I was boring, not because I was a boring person, I was boring because I went swimming straight from school every day, so therefore I didn't hang out with everybody in the park or whatever. So it was boring in a different context. But I think I have taken boring to mean all sorts of things.

The outcome of the methodological process is data that challenge us in a number of ways when we begin to consider psychosocial approaches. On the surface Nell appears to be an effective teacher of physical education, able and willing to 'deliver' the curriculum as required by current education policy. Inside Nell seems to be a mass of self-doubts and inadequacies that erode her self-confidence and ability to make her teaching interesting. How does she reconcile these tensions? Does she manage to repress the negativities? As the interpretation above suggests, the data indicate that Nell offers

different types of explanations of herself. The missing person in the policies appears to be a self-denigrating subject in the case of Nell. But what right has a researcher to make such strong claims and to what extent can a researcher accept at 'face value' such accounts of different levels of self-awareness? To what degree does the unconscious render impossible such acceptance? What legitimacy can we attribute to Nell's account and to Anne's re-telling of it?

As the Theory Reading Group considered the role of the subject, subjectivities, repression and the unconscious, Anne developed an interest in the extent to which these could 'get in the way' of knowledge claims in the representations she was committed to offering. The conversations with Nell had a particularly profound impact upon Anne's view of the project and the dilemmas with which she was faced. On one hand, there was evidence of a rational subject who knew and could articulate herself, offering plausible explanations for her experiences and meaning making. On the other, there was concern about the importance of repression and the unconscious, and the wishes and desires of both the participant and researcher. This takes us back to the question of what can be 'known and knowable' (Bibby 2011, 123) and, in this case, Anne's uncertainty about what could be claimed from the teachers' narratives of experiences and the explanations they offered of and for their accounts. Psychosocial readings of the data raised concerns both in relation to the notions of legitimate knowledge and the associated ethics.

Nell appeared to be able to think about and articulate her experiences in a way that offered a new 'legitimate' knowledge and which demonstrated that the interview process had 'worked' to make 'missing persons' visible. However, the disruptive new perspective created for thinking generated concern about the extent to which Anne's wish and desire for a process that satisfied her particular methodological and substantive concerns impacted upon the reading and articulation of data. The key issue was whether it was operating in a self-fulfilling way by constructing a particular reading of Nell. This process of thinking 'differently' as a result of the psychoanalytic disturbance left Anne with doubts about the rational subject who can know herself and raised significant questions: To what extent are we or should we be compelled to critique what we can say about Nell and her account of herself? Wertz et al. (2011), in *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*, provide multiple ways of reading one dataset, but Anne feels unsure about how to pursue this within her thesis. Is it academically possible and reasonable to accept and present the original reading as just one version of events? Do we have a responsibility to take up the challenge offered here to better understand the way in which the 'socially produced individual is not merely moulded, labelled, pushed around by external forces; but is formed by a process which treats neither society nor individual as a privileged beginning,

but takes interior and exterior as problematic categories' (Henriques et al. 1998, 9).

In the next section, we seek to offer some resolutions to the tensions between how the psychosocial figures in Geeta and Anne's research journeys by taking up Frosh's (2001, 630) recognition that there is 'no knowledge of the other without the engagement of the self'.

### **'Being captured' as a source of legitimacy and security**

In this section, we revisit the tensions between the rationality with which we are (usually) required to present our research and the unreasonable desires which (also) drive it. To do this, we reflect critically on Heather's experience of analysing 'someone else's data', embedding our discussion within the example of Lola's interview data.

Lola was the pseudonym given to a student who was interviewed as part of a study of the Mathematics Enhancement Course (MEC). The study was funded by King's College London and led by Jill Adler. The MEC is an English initiative set up to address the shortage of qualified mathematics teachers. It provides a one-year booster course in mathematics for those people without an undergraduate degree in the subject, but who still wish to train as secondary mathematics teachers. Heather was not involved in the initial research process and therefore she never met Lola in person. She began working collaboratively on the MEC study data when she moved institutions and found herself sharing an office with one of the team members, Sarmin Hossain. Together, Sarmin and Heather explored how participants negotiated their identity in relation to the MEC demand that students acquire an 'in-depth understanding' of mathematics in order to become good-enough mathematics teachers (Hossain, Mendick, and Adler 2013). This demand is foundational for the MEC programme and an article of faith for many mathematics educators (e.g. Ma 1999).

As Heather read through the 18 interview transcripts with MEC students, she felt herself 'being captured' by Lola – as Geeta was by talking with Maheera and Rohini, and Anne was by Nell. Heather, who describes herself as being a *difficult* person, was conscious of being attracted to Lola's story because she was a *difficult* participant – the student who, as we show next, was the most resistant to taking up the dominant MEC discourse that values acquiring an 'in-depth understanding' of mathematics.

While other students were overwhelmingly positive about the MEC, Lola simply described it as 'okay'. She then acknowledged and critiqued its rationale: 'The whole idea is for us to get a deeper understanding and sometimes we are rushed, so it's not very efficient'. In the space of the interview, she ascribed 'in-depth understanding' to her lecturers, and aligned herself with an oppositional 'we' who have 'lived with' a different approach and 'still do well':



I was a bit resistant ... We've lived with this; we still do well ... But, at the end of the day, you have, you have to look at the other side as well, but people find it difficult, because our lecturer said, 'If someone coming from the primary school has already known that ... multiply by 10, you just add zero...' but where I'm coming from, I don't feel like that that person is dumb.

In this extract, we can see how Lola, while making some concessions to 'the other side', constructs herself as part of a collective 'we' who are viewed as 'dumb' within MEC discourses. In their paper, Sarmin and Heather (Hossain, Mendick, and Adler 2013) justified their focus on Lola in relation to how she interrupts and problematises debates within mathematics education. Here, Lola's position as *trouble* within the MEC, corresponds with Heather's desire to *trouble* mathematics education. But, what is lost in this account of how/why Heather became captured by Lola in the way she was?

As Geeta found, psychosocial approaches provide breathing and thinking spaces, in this case to reflect on how we are drawn towards some data/participants rather than others. But having opened up this space, does connecting Heather's identification as difficult with her identification of Lola as also difficult then foreclose it even as it hints at something else? 'What we are taught to see as "natural" in the human condition, the capacity to use reason, is only a small part of the story: behind every action is a wish, behind every thought is an unreasonable desire' (Frosh quoted in Bibby 2011, 7). Heather's point of connection with Lola is likely to have led to a desire to positively inscribe her 'difficultness' and so may have drawn her to foreground the social over the psychic. However, our aim here is not to unpick the wishes and unreasonable desires which may or may not lie 'behind' Heather's fix(at)ing on Lola and her subsequent actions and thoughts. Instead, we wish to draw attention to: the consequences of these for the types of knowledge we produce and what disappears when we feel compelled to offer 'rational' accounts in order to legitimate our academic work. If we are drawn to data that resonate with us and feel comfortable, what constraints does this place upon the arguments that we develop? As in our account of Anne's work above, do 'unreasonable' desires for certainty render some things unknowable? And how does this include some and exclude others? (Walkerdine 1988). The resolution, if it is one, that runs through all our accounts, is 'that realistic understanding of others comes from a process of unconscious reflection in which the subjectivity of the [researcher] is intimately engaged' (Frosh 2001, 630).

As suggested above, through such a process, Heather (and Sarmin) came to understand Lola's resistance to the dominant MEC discourse as being related to aspects of her cultural background, rooted in early educational experiences in Nigeria. Using 'we', Lola inscribes herself within a Nigerian

‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1983). This is apparent in the following interview extracts:

I learned outside this country, the way of teaching is totally different ... the concept that we knew and just applied. Coming here, you need to understand why the concepts came about, how they came about, and you get a deeper understanding. Whereas the kind of knowledge and teaching I’ve been accustomed to is you get a formula, you understand, you just know the formula, you apply the formula, and get results.

I think the culture plays a lot of role in the way people are taught there, because in Nigeria, for instance, it’s rude to ask an elder, ‘Why?’ ... and what I understand here is that, as a teacher, you need to know all the ways because the, the student might understand one way better.

Sarmin and Heather argued that the MEC positioning of ‘in-depth understanding’ as the ‘right’ way to learn and teach mathematics challenges Lola’s investment in her Nigerian identity. They read her resistance to the MEC as part of her construction of a diasporic cultural identity and as resistance to a (post)colonial gaze that disfigures and destroys the ‘pasts’ of oppressed peoples (Hall 1992). They located this within wider processes of Othering in which subjectivities are constructed via ‘establishing opposites and “others” whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from “us”, and where this designation of Others re/produces hierarchical power relations’ (Said 1995, 332).

However, through renewing her engagement with psychosocial approaches within the reading group and with other collaborators, Heather reflected that we might also/alternatively understand Lola as a defended subject: the idea ‘that the self is forged out of unconscious defences against anxiety’ (Hollway and Jefferson 2000, 19). Within this reading, Lola’s resistance to the dominant discourse can be explained as an instance of splitting: the way ‘in which both people and events are experienced in very extreme terms, either as unrealistically wonderful (good) or as unrealistically terrible (bad)’ (Waddell 2002, 6). In Melanie Klein’s work, splitting is linked to the very early processes of feeding, in which the baby:

takes in the sense of having a bad mother. He [*sic*] has a bad mother within him. When she comforts and feeds him, and he has a good feeling, his mother again becomes good. He ‘projects’ his bad feeling and identifies her with it. He ‘introjects’ his experiences of her as calm, satisfying and good, and he himself acquires a good feeling within. He feels himself to be ‘good’. (Waddell 2002, 254)

Juxtaposing these two readings of Lola raises questions for us. While Anne’s concern was whether a researcher is ‘entitled to do more than seek honestly to represent what participants are trying to say’ (Frosh 2001, 638),

Heather – like Geeta – did not worry about inserting her own analysis. But, how do we legitimise knowledge produced through reading data against the conscious understandings of ‘our’ participants and in ways that could anger or distress them? Heather, not having met ‘Lola’, found this an easier process than did her co-authors, particularly Jill, who had interviewed Lola. Jill, having also set up the study in collaboration with four MEC tutors, had more investment in a particular way of knowing about the MEC. On one level we are seeking/gaining legitimacy through publication, but is this (ever) enough?

We can also see, in these two readings of Lola, the challenge of doing justice to both the social *and* the psychic in our work. Frost and Lucey (2010, 3) write:

psychosocial studies have a broad theoretical commitment to the notion that psychological issues cannot be validly abstracted from social, cultural and historical contexts and to the task of accounting for the social shaping of subjective experience without deterministically reducing the psychic to the social. Equally, they have a parallel commitment to the notion that social and cultural worlds have psychological dimensions and to the task of accounting for the ways in which the latter shape these worlds without deterministically reducing the social to the psychic.

How do we, as researchers, balance the social and the psychic, given that we often feel more at home in one than the other? Hollway (2012) has argued that, in the rush towards the psychic, the social got lost in her classic work with Jefferson, *Doing Qualitative Research Differently* (Hollway and Jefferson 2000). How far does an engagement with psychoanalytic ideas reduce the space for, and the force of, our social critiques? Once again we are returned to the question of the ethics of our analysis.

### Concluding thoughts

It hardly needs saying: psychoanalysis radicalizes knowledge by asserting its transformative nature ... from the inauguration of this method, this theory, there is a vivid construction of a way of knowing that leaves everything touched, changes it all. (Frosh 2001, 627)

In this paper, we have explored how our own ways of knowing have been touched by psychoanalysis and by our engagements in different institutional spaces, including those for discussion of our research.

We are aware that our different end points in these sections, with Anne and Geeta seeking more certainty in their interpretations than Heather or Paul, relate to our different levels of experience and institutional positions. We have argued that legitimacy is relational and achieved

through struggle, emerging from a range of academic practices which often reproduce dominant ways of knowing that require depersonalisation. The psychosocial provides ways of troubling these, and being troubled, through alternative epistemological positions, roads less travelled. We have found psychosocial research to be risky but rewarding, as we, as researchers, have 'become captured' in the process of engaging with our own emotions and entanglements with our 'objects of study'. It is through these engagements, and through working collaboratively to understand them, that we have experienced some security in both what we know and how we know it. Even as we have generated more questions than we have answered,

psychoanalysis demonstrates the virtues of a 'good-enough' theory, one which acknowledges the insistence of irrationality and emotion at the heart of knowledge, yet tries to say something helpful all the same. 'Let us not get too tied up in our inadequacies,' it seems to say, 'we can at least act in a principled way.' (Frosh 2001, 633)

This paper is not a report of our findings, but a discussion of research processes. In it, we have balanced our interests in our shared experience within a reading group, with a commitment to our individual research projects. Our meetings have engaged us in creative dialogues between these projects and our collective reading, interleaved with our reflexive accounts of ourselves as researchers. The balance between the social group and the individual researcher both parallels the twin foci of psychosocial research and shows up the false naïve dichotomies between the political and personal, public and private, sociological and psychoanalytic. Without resolving these tensions, we are aware of the primarily ethical nature of psychosocial research which engages the researcher. We believe that by adding reports of our self-concerns, doubts and subjective experiences as researchers, we open them up to greater methodological transparency and ethical scrutiny. By positioning ourselves and including dimensions which exceed the discursive in our research, we potentially become more reflexive. Acknowledging one's personal role in the knowledge-generation process, rather than assuming an external Archimedean point, makes the research enterprise ethically more defensible.

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