Epistemological or Disciplinary Differences in Psycho-Social Studies:

A Reply to Stephen Frosh

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Stephen has delineated the meanings of psychosocial studies in practice more than in theory. Although he has outlined a number of issues that might shape this as-yet unformed discipline - some of which I will take up in a moment - he has mainly told us about an on-going project. Authors come forward with work; manuscripts submitted are to him and the other co-editors of the psychosocial publication series. They respond. A dialogue has begun, based on actual work, rather than on abstract ideas.

Stephen and his colleagues have inaugurated a process that, by its own momentum, will contribute to structuring a field called psychosocial studies. The series title, *Studies in the Psychosocial*, carries forward the idea of psychosocial: after all, here are studies in this field. The definition of the terms of the project ends with the statement that 'books in this series will generally pass beyond their points of origin to generate concepts, understandings and forms of investigation that are distinctively psychosocial in character'. This definition, which in effect states that the nature of psychosocial is that it is psychosocial, might seem to beg the question of what is psychosocial. But I think that it does not, if one thinks in terms of a process set in motion.

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So what is the point of the process? Stephen gives a personal answer: he says that, for him and Wendy Hollway, 'it was the very material sense of being marginalized in the discipline of psychology that led to becoming a kind of "refugee" looking for a new intellectual home'. He also addresses this issue epistemologically by rhetorically questioning whether, 'if someone writes in a Lacanian or an object relational vein, both of which, it can be argued, locate the human subject in a heavily socialized terrain, are they automatically "in" psychosocial studies or do they have to do something else?'. Later he draws on Peter Redman, to say that there is a 'something' else, which, though difficult to pin down with precision, could be adumbrated. Psychosocial studies 'take processes of subjectification seriously while seeking to avoid over-socialised accounts of subjectivity [and] should have…an equal concern for the depth and range of *social* processes'. OK, he seems to say, now let's get down to work.

I take Stephen to be saying that there is a refugee problem around psychosocial studies, in personal, intellectual and social life. With himself as the personal, subjective reference point, he speaks of displaced persons and a displaced social location. I agree with his portrayal of dislocation or statelessness. Working in this area can be experienced as being someone trying to make a case for admission at the border; someone not quite sure on what grounds a case could be made, but who claims to be a hard-working person who will make a significant contribution to the host culture, if given a chance.

A contemporary example comes to mind. Mental health services are in crisis, while the vocabulary of the government seems not to recognize it. We hear of patients, sometimes in an acute state, being shipped far away from home in search of a place to accommodate them. We

hear of serious abuse of vulnerable patients in various forms of care. Again, there is no vocabulary to represent the contribution of the social environment, in which people work with people, to health and well-being or to deterioration. What could be more psychosocial than such a crisis? But it is surrounded by, and depicted in, language that does not refer to the actuality that it apparently addresses. It reminds me of the ambiguity of the cliché, 'transparent'. Transparency of processes answers all criticisms; but something that is transparent is not visible: one sees straight through it.

In a similarly misleading language, mental health services are led by the idea of 'Increasing Access to Psychological Therapies', the second phase of which, introduced in 2011, is 'Talking Therapies: a Four Year Plan of Action'. But of course, talking in any but the most limited way, is being systematically removed from mental health provision. The issue I am addressing is subjectivity as a stateless refugee, not only displaced, but unsure of his/her identity. Setting this trend in the broader context of social thinking, although subjectivity has been integral to sociology and philosophy at least since Husserl and phenomenology; and journals, such as *Subjectivities*, have recently appeared to provide a home; it is scorned as a legitimate and valued dimension of life.

I have given the example of mental health services, partly because it is a serious contemporary issue, and partly because it is an example of drawing and maintaining boundaries. Political decisions, made with economic and sometimes evidence-based legitimation, dictate what a mental health problem is and what is to be done about it. Subjectivity – the state of the suffering

mind – seems not to be relevant. One could say that it is transparent, the glass through which one looks to see the real problem underneath.

But how different is this overtly politically-driven absence of a language for subjectivity from the exclusion by sociologists, historians or political scientists of subjectivity from legitimate social discourse? From the time of Durkheim or Georg Simmel, we have been led to believe that psychology, in its focus on the individual, has nothing of value to say about social processes. And within psychology itself, subjectivity is also marginalized, as if it has little place in understanding the individual. The refugee status, to which Stephen refers, is easily recognized.

There seems to be a problem with subjectivity, whether one is a sociologist or a psychologist. In other words, it isn't about 'individual' or 'social': it is about subjectivity. The editors of *Studies in the Psychosocial* don't address this issue head-on. 'As three people committed to the development of psychosocial studies, do we not have the right simply to assert our vision…[o]r is there a more serious problem with becoming "gatekeepers" for psychosocial studies [acting in a way that] mimics precisely the authoritarian disciplinary structures we are trying to resist'? So, they receive manuscripts, they discuss them, they come to decisions, they encourage, they make judgments. In fact, they enact subjectivity, and cannot explain it in terms beyond describing the process they go through.

Compare this hesitant, socially-inclusive, subjective account, which is also embedded in their definition of the field, to the declaration of the journal, *Sociology Mind*, the very title of which shouts 'subjectivity'. But listen.

The main purpose and goal of this journal is to synergize sociological imagination in the 21st century toward a critical understanding of new social and cultural forces that call for scientific interpretation and analysis of facts and values. Specifically, it seeks to: Promote analytical research and inquiry in socio-cultural aspects of human conditions that warrant scientific interventions; Develop sociological models and methods to unravel and resolve inter-and-intra-societal problems that cause dysfunctional behaviors among people, communities and nations; Foster interdisciplinarity as a vehicle of scientific dialogue and communication toward a better world.

(http://www.library.georgetown.edu/newjour/publication/sociology-mind-0; accessed 12th June 2014)

There is no subjectivity here.

So what is the problem with subjectivity? I do not think it is an epistemological or methodological problem. I think it has to do with writing and thinking ourselves out of the field of our own interests, passions, concerns and curiosity. It is a strange abnegation of ourselves – a social version of neuroscience. The way forward is to put ourselves back at the centre of concern.

If we do that, what comes immediately to mind is that our whole interest in the social world is the way it is formed through us as individuals. As far as I know, we are unable to derive the properties of the simplest molecules from the properties of their constituent atoms, but we are not in the least interested in how an atom comes to include itself in a molecule. In the case of a social

unit as a molecule, we have no interest other than understanding how the individual is included in the social molecule.

I think this difference puts explanatory thinking into a different field. This different field is not that of Dilthey's human sciences, based on *Verstehen*; or whether projective identification is an adequate theory of *Verstehen*; but of what we mean by subjectivity and how centres of subjectivity become social. What we mean by 'social' then becomes how did we get to where we are. Consciousness is historical awareness: how we live our experience now as an inheritance of our experience of yesterday or yesteryear, or a second ago.

Here is where a problem surfaces. I don't think there can be a social theory of subjectivity. My roots are psychoanalytic, but I don't see it as psychoanalytic psychologizing to offer a perhaps simplistic model of subjectivity. It begins with Freud's description of what he called 'endopsychic perception': the experience of believing one's thoughts have been heard without hearing oneself speak them (1909, p. 164). It is a moment of subjectivity and it is intrinsically social. In this example, Freud equates thinking with being thought about and spoken to. The ego, or whatever you want to call a centre of awareness and of agency, is simultaneously an object of awareness. Mostly we are unaware of being spoken to as we think, and mostly we feel pretty stable in being able to perceive someone who is speaking to us and to whom we are speaking. But it doesn't take much for that security to break down, and to no longer know when we are thinking and when someone else is speaking.

The extrapolation I want to make is to say that we also cannot be very sure that the character of what we call social is neatly separate from what we call personal. Following that line of thinking, I don't think any account of the social is adequate without the personal, and that it is disciplinary defensiveness that claims otherwise; and we do have theories of identity that help us understand this defensiveness. It isn't an epistemological issue. I also think that we can use a lot of the same vocabulary for both realms, and in doing so, we will fashion a psychosocial vocabulary. The problem is not so much how to do it, but the barriers against doing it.

I want to give one, brief example from my own work, which is on memory in post-war Germany. Historians tend to be almost as skeptical about memory studies as they are about psychoanalysis. Memory is what individuals do; societies plainly do not have subjectivity and cannot remember anything. The psychoanalysts and founders of the journal, *Psyche*, Alexander and Margrete Mitscherlich, published a book in 1967, called *The Inability to Mourn*. Based on 100s of clinical cases from their psychosomatic clinic in the Heidelberg University, they came to the view Germans could not mourn a mammoth loss as individuals or as a nation, and that it obstructed and distorted memories that had to be faced. I cannot now go into the details of their argument, beyond saying that they thought that the German nation could be – had to be – characterized by a mass psychological symptom. Their work is commonly either ignored in studies of post-war Germany or passed over in a sentence or two.

I have worked with the hypothesis that remembering is a form of reparation, and that, as such, one cannot understand it without including guilt as a driving force – a most a-social idea. When I set the basis for enquiry in the historical literature, I found detailed accounts of the political

landscape, in which the nature and extent of German remembering and accountability for what was remembered were explicit. For example, in becoming the first chancellor of the newly-formed Federal Republic of Germany, Konrad Adenauer was clear that the new country could have either memory or democracy, but not both. 'Although Adenauer's own anti-Nazi credentials were unassailable, a vote for him was also a vote to end denazification, trials of former Nazi officials, and purges of former members of the Nazi Party from industry and the civil service' (Herf, p. 270). In his first governmental address, on September 20, 1949, Adenauer said 'The government of the Federal Republic, in the belief that many have subjectively atoned for a guilt that was not heavy, is determined where it appears acceptable to do so to put the past behind us'(quoted in Herf, p. 271).

The problem of memory, atonement, establishing the new German state on top of discredited, despised foundations cannot be completed in these terms. In fact, the language gives rise to a particular historical view: that one cannot speak of the psychological repression of the Nazi past, given that it was continuously talked about. Psychoanalysis, therefore, is once again shown to have no value in historical explanation. Adenauer's language talks about it, while also sidelining it. Maybe repression is not the right word, but defence is, and that is a technical matter to be settled, not dismissed.

I want to go back to the *Studies in the Psychosocial* project, on which Stephen concentrated. The editors have set a practice going without specifying very much about the epistemological issues involved. They have presented themselves as thoughtful people who aim to transcend disciplinary boundaries in order to promote 'something extra that makes a book an example of

psychosocial studies…' (p. 4). They make judgments as to whether that 'something extra' is present, without saying much about what it is. I think they are on the right track.

I would add that there really isn't an epistemological problem. There is a disciplinary problem, a problem in sharing space. Ronald Britton speaks of the narcissistic problem of sharing space, and I think that captures the nature of the problem. I don't know if we will get over it, but it would be a misdirected move to try to solve the apparent epistemological incommensurabilities between social and psychological analyses. They are creations of disciplines, felt to be needed to secure differences between them, and that is the problem that needs addressing.

References

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