

## **Psychosocial Studies and Psychology: Is a Critical Approach Emerging?**

### **Introduction**

There once was little doubt that psychology should be thought of as the ‘science of behaviour’ and hence that it would aspire to the seeming rigour of the natural sciences and, especially, be able to distance itself from the arts. This lofty ambition has turned to air, despite repeated attempts by psychologists to establish fully-fledged scientific credentials - notably, these days, through neuroscience (which does indeed seem to be scientific) and evolutionary psychology (which assuredly is not, if a respect for evidence and scholarly argument is a hallmark of the scientific world view -Rose and Rose, 2001). What has become increasingly apparent is that psychology is a broad discipline, largely but not solely empirical, very fuzzy at the edges where it merges with sociology, biology, brain science and the humanities, and just as much a discursive construction as any other area of knowledge. Enough Foucauldian-inspired scholarship has now flowed under the bridge of academic and clinical psychology (e.g. Henriques et al, 1998; Rose, 1999) for it to be well established that psychology emerges out of a set of perceptions of individuality and ‘selfhood’ which in turn are connected with the hegemony of particular constructions of social reality -for example, the belief that there is such a thing as a bounded human subject, the biology and psychology of which (or whom) are closely entwined, and which can be studied as a coherent object of knowledge.

The empirical tradition is still dominant within psychology, partly for political reasons (it pays to have a discipline registered as a science) but more because of the continuing dominance of the modernist vision of progress through technological advancement. Knowing

more, controlling more fully, intervening with more power -these are not only the aspirations of the drugs industry (for which another portmanteau word, *psychobiological*, is key), but also of the broader range of psychologists, who can be thought of as basically on a voyage of discovery and conquest. Yet what is apparent is that while maps of the brain may be becoming more accurate and interesting, and artificial intelligence more intelligent, on the whole psychology does not develop in a linear way, uncovering mysteries once and for all as it proceeds, but cyclically and allusively, sometimes producing insights, not infrequently influencing the ways in which we conceptualise ourselves, and often returning roughly to where it started. In so doing, much psychology acts rather like the humanities in deepening perception rather than in accumulating knowledge; it is also very much like other social sciences, increasing local understanding without making a giant, universal step forward.

There are a variety of issues emerging from this. First, psychology is a branch of activity that has its own ideological and hence political investments -rather a different point of view from the one adopted by those who claim for it some kind of 'scientific neutrality'. Not only has psychology been used actively by governments from time to time, but it is also part of the state apparatus for selection, categorisation and treatment -as witnessed in education and health as well as management, policing and the military (e.g. Burman, 1994). Secondly, the emphasis on the individual as the object of knowledge is an approach making specific ideological claims, which can be seen most clearly in assumptions about the relationship between what is individual (seen as 'personal') and what is social. In particular, the strict division between individual and social risks the Scylla of reducing one to the other (so that, for example, the social is seen as no more than the free interactions of individuals, or the individual is seen as fully constituted by her or his social class, or gender or 'race' position) and the Charybdis of essentialising each element so that the social is 'bracketed off' in

discussions of the individual, or vice versa. It is assumptions such as these which *psychosocial* work is set up to explore. This is not to say that psychosocial studies necessarily acts in a deconstructionist frame when faced with the ambiguities of the relationship between psychic and social. Quite often, as a literature search in the area will reveal, the term 'psychosocial' is used to refer to relatively conventional papers dealing with social adjustment or interpersonal relations, for example. Much rarer within the psychological literature are attempts to examine the psychosocial as a seamless entity, as a space in which notions which are conventionally distinguished - 'individual' and 'society' being the main ones- are instead thought of together, as intimately connected or possibly even the same thing. One reason for this rarity, presumably amongst many, is the sheer difficulty of conceptualising the 'psychosocial' as an intertwined entity, with all the imponderables it raises: for example, is there after all a modicum of 'incommensurability' between the psychological and the social, a limit to the extent to which the two can really be thought of together? In other words, is there something intractable in each of the two parts of this fused-together whole, so that if one gives up the crutch of only working with what is a disciplinary pre-given ('individual' *or* 'society') one is left clutching thin air?

The complexity of forging a psychosocial studies presence within *psychology* is perhaps reflected in the fact that in Britain, few initiatives towards setting up Centres or Departments of Psychosocial Studies seem to have arisen out of the discipline of psychology. For example, the School of Social Work and Psychosocial Studies at the University of East Anglia, as its name implies, grew out of the School of Social Work as a direct response to cuts in government funding for probation training in the 1990s. The undergraduate programme in psychosocial studies focuses 'on the scientific study of human relations in a social context' ([www.uea.ac.uk/swk/history](http://www.uea.ac.uk/swk/history)); its website announces that 'taking from psychology and the

social sciences those theories that throw light on real world interactions, the programme explores how they can be used in practical situations' ([www.uea.ac.uk/swk/pss](http://www.uea.ac.uk/swk/pss)). Inspection of the course outlines suggests that whilst there is a very strong representation of psychology in the teaching curriculum, the course does indeed focus on applied psychology in social contexts, with a view to producing graduates who will work in 'human service professions' (ibid). Research interests of staff members are also clearly located in the application and evaluation of psychological interventions and social work programmes.

The Psychosocial Studies Area at the University of East London has been in existence as a teaching force since the mid-1980s, 'when it was created on the basis of the interests of a group of staff and in response to student demand for courses which tried to address the realities both of individual experience and of large-scale social processes' ([www.uel.ac.uk/social-sciences/human-relations/psychosocial](http://www.uel.ac.uk/social-sciences/human-relations/psychosocial)). Its dominant origins lie in sociology, although what is distinctive about the UEL approach is its long-term interest in psychoanalysis as applied to the cultural and social sphere, an interest that has included, and continues to include, strong links with the Tavistock Clinic. The web site confirms the more psychological trend of UEL psychosocial studies with its statement of a linking theme across its courses: 'a commitment to interdisciplinary work, to bridging between the individual focus of much psychology and the concerns of the social sciences with society, history and culture' (ibid). However, it is also clear that the conditions for the emergence and maintenance of this lively area of studies have not included close links with the UEL Department of Psychology; rather, it has formed a central plank in the Department of Human Relations, which is rooted in sociological and cultural studies work. In this regard, psychosocial studies, which 'offers new ways of exploring the relationships between individuals and their society, encompassing both the individual focus of psychology and the

broader cultural and historical concerns of sociology... [and providing] a unique opportunity to study a “socially-aware” psychology alongside an “individual-sensitive” sociology’ (ibid.) is offering an alternative to the University discipline of psychology, not something in dialogue with it.

This separation between psychology and psychosocial studies is also evident in a third, new initiative in British Universities, the Centre for Psychosocial Studies at the University of the West of England. This Centre has a very strong social theory and group relations approach, rooted in psychoanalysis as applied to the cultural arena. Its statement about itself makes it clear that this is not a psychological initiative in the usual disciplinary sense: ‘We are also concerned with the application of such perspectives to organisational, social and political issues and with the mutual influencing of psychoanalysis and contemporary social and political theory. Finally, some of the group are interested in the history of psychoanalysis and allied disciplines such as Group Relations and with the development of the therapeutic culture’ ([www.uwe.ac.uk/research/centres/pss](http://www.uwe.ac.uk/research/centres/pss)). An account of the Centre’s aspirations by Clarke and Hoggett (2001) affirms strongly the psychoanalytic and social theory focus of the work; there is, indeed, little evidence in their material of an engagement with more traditional psychology or social psychology, except possibly in the management area, and staff members are primarily sociologists and social theorists.

These initiatives suggest that the field of psychosocial studies has emerged in the UK very separately from psychology. In fact, it has arisen primarily from disciplines that lie in a critical relationship with mainstream academic psychology – sociology and psychoanalysis, with applications such as social work and cultural studies. This means that the intellectual base for psychosocial studies is set up in opposition to psychology, or at least in isolation

from it. Moreover, because psychosocial studies shares in the (largely poststructuralist) enterprise of examining the conditions for knowledge out of which disciplinary power arises, the bases for its work within psychology actually lie *outside* psychology, in social theory, philosophy of science, linguistics, cultural studies, critical theory, psychoanalysis, and discourse studies. For example, its key term, aside from the word 'psychosocial' itself, is probably that of the human 'subject' as it has been used in contemporary poststructuralist studies. This term (ironically one used in mainstream psychology to refer to the 'objects' upon whom experiments are conducted) is consciously chosen to reflect a set of fluid and contradictory ideas, 'slipping between the linguistic notion of the subject of a sentence, the psychological notion of the individual human entity with agency and subjectivity, and the social/political notion of being "subject to" something more extensive than oneself' (Frosh, 1999a, pp.837-8). What is central here is the ambiguity in the notion of the subject: it is both a centre of agency and action (a language-user, for example) and the subject *of* (or subjected *to*) forces operating from elsewhere - whether that be the 'crown', the state, gender, 'race' and class, or the unconscious. The important point is that the subject is not a pre-given entity, nor something to be found through searching; it is rather a site, in which there are criss-crossing lines of force, and out of which that precious feature of human existence, subjectivity, emerges.

From what has been argued above, it appears that while academic psychology has been subjected to criticism because of its foundational assumptions concerning knowledge and science, and while this criticism feeds into what might usefully be termed 'psychosocial studies' as a set of approaches offering a deconstruction of the traditional dichotomy between individual (psyche) and social, psychosocial studies has emerged largely outside the discipline of psychology itself. The consequence is that it remains marginalised within

psychology, with the notion of ‘psychosocial’ appropriated for quite conventional studies of social influences on individual behaviour. Psychology itself maintains a fairly straightforward position towards the putative accumulation of knowledge, with the critical input that psychosocial studies might provide being channelled elsewhere. My suggestion at this point is that this ‘de-psychologising’ of psychosocial studies represents an important missed opportunity. For the many reasons already outlined earlier in this Introduction, a critical approach of the kind psychosocial studies might offer is important for engaging with, and shifting, some of the more fixed and limiting assumptions of the traditional psychological knowledge-enterprise.

With these preliminaries in mind, this paper outlines the ‘principles’ or possibly *foundational assumptions* which members of the Centre for Psychosocial Studies within the School of Psychology at Birkbeck College, University of London have signed up to, to examine what they mean and what their implications could be for psychology. Following this, I want briefly to articulate some recurrent issues produced as we attempt to work according to these principles, because these issues seem to me to be expressive of real intellectual struggles in the area. The aim here is to examine what happens when psychosocial studies arises within an academic department of psychology, looking particularly at how principles of work emerge that are related to psychology’s disciplinary assumptions and what happens as these are put into practice. The specific objective of this paper is to give an account of the promise and pitfalls of psychosocial studies, recruiting it as a viable tool for enriching psychology both conceptually and practically.

## **Foundational Assumptions for a Psychology-Based Psychosocial Studies**

The Centre for Psychosocial Studies at Birkbeck was ‘formed in 2000 to reflect the research

and teaching interests of a substantial group of academic staff within the School of Psychology who are committed to innovative, interdisciplinary research and teaching focused on the interweaving of psychological and social concerns' ([www.psyc.bbk.ac.uk/cps](http://www.psyc.bbk.ac.uk/cps)). It arose out of a conscious attempt to develop a space for critical thinking in psychology, with a focus (as will be seen below) on social and discursive psychology, qualitative research methods and psycho-political issues. The Centre holds within it a number of graduate training courses, especially in a range of psychotherapies such as family therapy, group analysis and psychodynamic counselling. As such, the Centre combines two traditionally marginal tendencies in psychology –the training of psychotherapists and social critique- yet operates not just within the culture of a traditional psychology department (which includes some very successful cognitive neuroscientists and applied social and family researchers) but is staffed mainly by academics with backgrounds in psychology. One of the many consequences of this is that the Centre has worked with a tension between developing critical ideas on mainstream psychology, and struggling to be good enough in research and teaching terms to hold its own within the discipline's own academic expectations.

The principles upon which the Centre is based were formulated at the time it was set up as:

- Concern with the human subject as a social entity;
- Interest in the emergence of subjectivity in the social domain;
- Interest in critique, defined as a concern with ideological issues in psychology;
- Methodological pluralism, including an active assertion of the value of qualitative and theoretical research as well as more traditional quantitative research;
- Theoretical pluralism, including interest in discourses traditionally marginalised in academic psychology (for instance, psychoanalysis, systems theory, feminist theory, phenomenology);



- Interest in inter- and transdisciplinary approaches to psychological theory and research;
- Interest in personal and social change, including psychotherapy.

In what follows, each of these principles is briefly elaborated as a way of exploring, through our experience, how psychosocial studies can inform and challenge psychological work.

### **Concern with the human subject as a social entity.**

This principle does not claim that the human subject is not, for example, *also* some kind of ‘biological’ entity. However, it directs attention to the central problematic issue in psychosocial studies, one which has previously exercised sociologists but rarely psychologists: what does it mean to theorise the subject as *always social*, ‘imbricated’ as the poststructuralists used to say, or better, *constructed in and of* sociality? How can we think about this issue without finding ourselves back in the cul-de-sac of traditional social psychology, which tends to take the ‘individual’ for granted and ask how he or she interacts with and interprets the social, thus assuming the existence of an individual essence which is separate from sociality? The general position implied by this first principle is that the interesting question is how this ‘individual’ comes to be, as a product of various social forces acting on subjectivity.

This approach has some obvious affinities with social constructionism (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1994), with its assertion that knowledge is negotiated and invented out of material made available through social and interpersonal means, and that this knowledge is self-referential in that it constructs the knower as it is produced. What then becomes an issue in this way of thinking, is the complex question of how the socially constructed subject can be theorised as

more than just the ‘dupe’ of ideology; that is, can such subjects be more than the social conditions which give rise to them, can their sense of (even relative) ‘agency’ be taken seriously? Here, some recent work on power can be helpful, because it suggests that acceptance of the idea that people are structured by forces over which they do not have control, and that their ongoing engagement with the world is constantly impacted upon by those forces, is not the same thing as proposing that people have no agency, no capacity to exert influence, or to try to understand, resist or rebel. Judith Butler (1997) addresses a similar point when she distinguishes between two types or modes of power in arguing that, ‘Power considered as a condition of the subject is necessarily not the same as power considered as what the subject is said to wield’ (p.12). Subjects are constructed by and in power; that is, they are constituted by social forces that lie outside them, in the workings of the world. But this does not mean that subjects have no agency; rather, their agentic status is *what they are produced with*, and it enables them to take hold of power and use it. Our position in language exemplifies this: without being ‘subjected to’ the structures and indeed the specific contents of a particular language, we cannot become human subjects, capable of communication with one another and of representation of objects in a socially meaningful way. The Humpty-Dumpty insistence that words should mean just what the speaker wants them to mean is a recipe for, perhaps even a definition of, psychosis. On the other hand, language does not shift and change by fiat, but as a product of the ways in which it is spoken and understood by its users, and each of us can attempt to be inventive and completely novel in how we do this. So language both constrains what can be said and allows a space for subjects to exert control over it. This does not free people from the external operations of the social order, but it does endow them with subjectivity, with a richness of imagination, if one wishes to think of it that way. It means that they engage with power and are not merely its obedient and loyal ‘subjects’. This can be seen most poignantly and perhaps controversially

in accounts given of their identity position by marginalised groups. For example, studies of boys who have sexually abused other children tend to position these boys as disturbed as well as disturbing, often from within a medicalised discourse (Emerson and Frosh, 2001). Work in our Centre shows how such boys can be seen both as embodying certain features of 'hegemonic' masculinity (Connell, 1995) and of actively struggling to manage and re-invent their identity position, sometimes in clearly counter-hegemonic ways (Emerson and Frosh, forthcoming).

What is balanced here is an appreciation of the ambiguities and ambivalence of power as it operates on, through and in the subject, and as it is operated on *by* the subject. Neither form of power can be reduced to the other. Rather, the subject emerges through the operations of power, but stands out over and against it too: that is, as Foucault (1979) argues, where power operates, so does resistance to power, and this resistance is no mere habitual response, but an active construction of being. Reiterative, coercive in its very definition, power operates to make certain things happen, inside as well as outside the subject; but the way it works is also to grant the subject some otherness. A large task for theory is to find a way to map this place at which power, and the social more generally, meets the gaze of its own creation. Both bound and free, more than what forms them yet only existing as a consequence of the constructing processes of sociality -this is the painful state from which human subjects have to use agency and imagination to make something of themselves.

### **Interest in the emergence of subjectivity in the social domain.**

This is closely related to the foregoing, in that it too opposes the separation of 'out-there' from 'in-here', but its focus is on the eruptions of subjectivity into the supposedly objective conditions of the social order. There are various ways of considering this, the key issue being

to find ways of describing the effects of what might be called 'objectification' (Miller, 1987) and what the Lacanians often absorb into the notion of narcissism -that propensity to discover in the apparently 'outside' world, in the domain of the 'objective', what seems to belong, or at least to have its origin, 'inside'. This represents a markedly different attitude towards 'objectivity' than that encompassed in most psychology, with its realist assumptions and attempts to 'control' expressions of subjectivity. The psychoanalytic concept of fantasy is perhaps the most potent theoretical expression of the interpellation of the subjective into the social, in that it suggests (at least in its Kleinian form, particularly when combined with the notion of projective identification –Hinshelwood, 1991) that fantasy is not 'just' something that occupies an internal space as a kind of mediation of reality, but that it also has material effects, directing the activities of people and investing the social world with meaning. That is, to understand human experience and action, from its most intimately internal to its most blatantly political, one has to know how to pay fantasy its due. From a somewhat different (Lacanian) perspective, Slavoj Žižek (e.g. 1994) communicates the social implications of this view in his articulation of the way fantasy might govern the relationship of individuals and collectives to themselves and others. Writing in the wake of the new nationalism which exploded in Europe after the demise of the Soviet Union, he argues that to comprehend the intensity and apparent irrationality of the internecine struggles and atavistic racisms that so plague the contemporary scene, one has to develop an understanding of the unconscious structure of fantasies around which, for example, repudiation of otherness is organised. For Žižek, this structure is one of *excess*, of that which cannot be accounted for by socio-political 'realities' or explicit beliefs. More precisely, accounts of social phenomena that neglect detailed examination of the investment (Žižek calls it 'enjoyment') of fantasy will remain abstracted from the activities of the people who are involved. 'In this precise sense,' Žižek (1994, p.78) notes, overstating the case, 'War is always also a *war of fantasies*.' Jacqueline

Rose (1996) too, arguing that fantasy should be ‘at the heart of our political vocabulary’ comments,

Like blood, fantasy is thicker than water, all too solid *-contra* another of fantasy’s more familiar glosses as ungrounded supposition, lacking in foundation, not solid *enough*. (p.5)

Like Žižek, Rose identifies the material nature of fantasy, the way its processes as well as its effects can be seen. Moreover, the issue is not just one of *acknowledging* fantasy, taking it into account when piecing together a full picture of an event: it is the fantasy that fuels the politics, as well as the other way around; indeed, it may be that it is the former even more than the latter.

Of course this is no one-way causal event, nor can subjectivity be reduced to fantasy and nothing else: even within psychoanalysis, the workings of the ‘internal world’ are taken to be more complex than that (Frosh, 1999b). Some psychoanalysts have also begun to engage fully with the idea that what is taken to be ‘internal’ to the subject is premised on, and in constant tension with, what is outside or ‘other’ (Laplanche, 1997; Fonagy and Target, 1996).

Nevertheless, what studies of racism and social hatred in particular reveal (Frosh, 2002a, Žižek, 1994), is that there is always something ‘excessive’ about psychic functioning, and that this ‘excess’ leaks into the social, structuring it and giving it intensity and significance.

The dialectic here, to use an old-fashioned term, is paradigmatic: the social is psychically invested and the psychological is socially formed, neither has an essence apart from the other.

Just as we need a theory of how ‘otherness’ enters what is usually taken as the ‘self’, so we need concepts which will address the ways in which what is ‘subjective’ is also found out there.

### **Interest in critique, defined as a concern with ideological issues in psychology.**

It will already be clear that a fundamental claim of the kind of psychosocial studies with which this paper deals, is that it offers critical leverage on psychological theories and practices. This is a key strategic point if psychosocial studies is to hold onto an awareness of the socially and historically constructed nature of the discipline of psychology as a whole, and of its 'object of study', the psychological subject, in particular. From the perspective of a critical approach to psychology, it is apparent that psychological work cannot be construed as merely 'problem solving', the term given by Kuhn (1970) to scientific activity which takes place within accepted boundaries, when the general paradigm for what is valuable in a discipline is uncontroversial. It is well attested in social, historical and discursive explorations (e.g. Henriques et al, 1998), and is lived out in the experience of working in academic psychology departments, that psychology has a specific history relating to particular conditions of emergence which have made it what it is, and that underneath a spurious surface of accepted norms (for instance, the scientific paper model for measuring good work) there is turmoil. The sheer abrasiveness of encounters around genetics and evolutionary psychology, or the legitimacy of psychoanalysis, or the relevance of feminism, or the history of psychology's involvement with racism, suggests that what is going on is a struggle between different ways of conceptualising psychology, rather than simply the best strategies of experiment and investigation (e.g. Segal, 1999, Dalal, 2002). A *critical* approach within the context of psychosocial studies means taking this struggle seriously, seeing it as indicative of the actual problematic of psychology, rather than a technical nuisance because the best methods have not yet been worked out. From a psychosocial perspective, that is, all psychological work - whether it calls itself traditional or, indeed, 'critical' - requires constant examination for what it reveals of relations of power and dominance, assumptions over 'human nature', and the connections between what is taken to be 'psychological' and what

(conventionally, the 'social') is not. In this respect, some of the theoretical work derived from our Centre is a reminder not only that psychology itself needs scrutiny for its recycling of unquestioned assumptions, but that the same can be true of psychosocial studies itself. Examples here include engagements with 'new' topics such as masculinity, which can at times mark a backing-away from important struggles (Segal, 1999), or the 'discursive turn' in psychology, which can lead to a reduction of what is known to what can be said (Frosh, 2002b).

Maintenance of a critical stance becomes especially significant because of the contribution psychology itself makes to the construction of its own subject; that is, because psychology deals with human subjects as its topic of study, its claims to knowledge are themselves exertions of power. This can be seen particularly clearly in the history of psychological theories on 'race'; the use of psychological 'expertise' to generate social policies is also relevant; more generally, the ways in which people construe themselves owes a lot to influential psychological theories, perhaps particularly psychoanalytic and biomedical ones (think how the label ADHD now applies, or how people routinely use sexual repression or notions such as 'trauma' or 'acting out' as explanations of their own or others' behaviour). Contemporary subjectivities are to a considerable extent governed by the perceptions of psychology, particularly where claims to scientific status are made and accepted. Conversely, psychological theories draw strength from the 'common sense' (that is, ideologically inscribed) assumptions and ways of symbolising experience prevalent in the culture. Exploring the manner in which psychology becomes a resource for meaning-making in everyday life, and the significance this has for people's understanding of themselves and the world, is part of the broadly critical agenda of a psychosocial perspective, linked as it is to the general argument that the human subject is made in and of social processes.

**Methodological pluralism, including an active assertion of the value of qualitative and theoretical research as well as more traditional quantitative research.**

While there certainly should be space for quantitative research within the domain of psychosocial studies, particularly in relation to the strategic gains they can bring in influencing social policy (e.g. Tasker and Golombok, 1997, whose work on lesbian parenting has been used in legal cases over child care), what we are dissatisfied with is the routine uncritical reliance on positivist models of measurement and control which have characterised psychology through much of its modern history. Psychosocial studies have ingrained in them an effort to recover or construct *meanings*; that is, they work in a terrain mined by phenomenology as well as by critical theory and psychoanalysis, in which interpretive work is given priority. This involves an assertion of the value of interpretive, qualitative methods (some of which have a long history in other orthodox social sciences such as anthropology), despite difficulties in establishing stability and generalisability of findings. These issues have been discussed very fully by feminist and other qualitative and critical researchers (Henwood and Pidgeon 1992; Emerson and Frosh, forthcoming; Smith, 2003); the key point here is that qualitative research is part of a paradigmatic revolution affecting the social and psychological sciences which has contributed to the erosion of the hegemony of traditional empirical science in pre-eminently determining what counts as knowledge. This includes advocacy of a constructionist rather than representational paradigm for understanding language; that is, because experience is constantly produced in language, research becomes concerned with gathering and analysing discursive forms, talk and text. Analysis of the primary data of such material seeks to demonstrate the discourses people draw upon, how these construct or constitute available identities or subject positions and prevent or marginalise others, and what issues of power and social practice are bound up with them.



In practice, much of the energy fuelling psychosocial methodologies is drawn from an attempt to explore the ways in which subjectivities are constituted relationally and through institutional and social processes. As noted earlier, this is a very different stance from that adopted by mainstream academic psychology, which is characterised by suspicion (sometimes at a near-phobic level) of the 'subjective' because of the apparently distorting effects it can have on results. Much psychological research still embraces a classical theory of measurement, in which it is assumed that there is some 'true score' out there in the world to be uncovered, with our efforts to do so hampered by 'error', including that introduced by the subjective feelings and beliefs of researchers and participants alike. (This is despite the existence of a profound critique of classical theory in the form of generalisability theory for over 30 years –Cronbach et al, 1972.) Psychosocial research, engaging as it does with the idea that subjectivity is constructed in social contexts, has treated the research setting as one of those contexts, paying attention to the manner in which participants and researchers alike work to make meaning, and how this might reflect the structures within which they find themselves. This procedure is visible in the weight given to reflexive, narrative style interviews that acknowledge that every encounter is a site for the generation of new identity positions. For example, in the research carried out by Frosh et al (2002) into the emergent 'masculinities' of boys in London schools, it was clear that these masculinities were being 'made' (that the participants were 'doing boy') in ways that were specific to the research context (e.g. they performed very differently in group and individual interviews). Rather than seeing these differences as reflecting 'error', however, we see them as demonstrations of the use boys make of the discursive structures of masculinity as they are found in particular interactional situations, and make this part of the subject matter of our research.

The concern with subjectivity as a key focus for research distances psychosocial modes of investigation somewhat from the group and identity research most characteristic of British social psychology, for example social identity theory and its related ‘minimal group experiment’ methodology (e.g. Tajfel, 1984; see also Billig, 2002). It does, however, link with the approaches adopted by many psychodynamically oriented researchers, especially in terms of observational studies that pay serious attention to processes *in the observer*, using these as sources of insight into the dynamics of the situation being observed (e.g. Hinshelwood and Skogstad, 2000). More broadly, psychodynamically oriented research has long adopted ethnographic and case study models that allow space for a principled focus on how knowledge emerges from interactional systems, and on how the accounts participants produce of their experiences require careful analytic exploration and nuanced interpretive analysis, balancing a concern with grounded data and an interest in the ways personal and institutional accounts can serve ‘defensive’, or at least rhetorical, functions (e.g. Trist and Murray, 1990). The issues surrounding these psychodynamic approaches can be seen emerging in some recent discussions around the tensions between discursive and psychoanalytic approaches (Wetherell 2003; Frosh et al, 2003), particularly in relation to what might count as evidence justifying interpretations of interview material.

Although the discursive turn mentioned above has been very productive for critical psychology and potentially for psychosocial approaches, there are numerous problematic issues embedded in the turn to discourse, which is one reason why psychosocial studies needs to maintain a pluralistic framework, acknowledging the partial nature of all claims to knowledge. These problematic issues include questions of the legitimacy of particular interpretive strategies and the possibility that focusing on language leads to the neglect of other significant psychological, social or historical modalities, such as spirituality or trauma

(Frosh, 2002b). It is here that the importance of *theoretical* work should be reiterated, to constantly question and reframe data analysis, challenging the interpretations placed upon it. Indeed, there is much to be said in favour of the contention that psychology suffers from having too much data in a context of too little theory; in many respects, for example, the most startling advances in the psychosocial area have been produced by radical theoretical interventions such as those of Foucault, rather than by new empirical ‘discoveries’.

**Theoretical pluralism, including interest in discourses traditionally marginalised in academic psychology (for instance, psychoanalysis, systems theory, feminist theory, phenomenology).**

The theory one uses, however, is of the utmost importance. Academic psychology, following the main road of positivist epistemology and idealising of the natural sciences, has generated a large number of micro-theories within its borders, but also systematically excluded a variety of positions which could cause trouble -that is, which are potentially critical or at least extol the virtues of alternative viewpoints. Those listed here are those which encompass the main positions to be found in our group; they are by no means homogeneous or indeed without contradictions (psychoanalysis has often been at odds with feminism as with systems theory; phenomenology has its own substantial philosophical heritage which at times has been drawn on by psychoanalysis, at other times opposed to it; feminists have been major critics of systems theory as well as some of the prime developers of it). Nevertheless, what unites these theories is their interpretive stance plus their significance in the wider terrain of the social sciences coupled with their marginality within psychology. The substantial and independent philosophical bases of these approaches as a group gives them critical leverage (they stand outside, rather than being incorporated within, psychology) as well as obvious appeal for attempts to create a psychology engaged with meanings and social forms. Notably, they are

also on the whole *reflexive* approaches, in the dual sense both of acknowledging the impact of the research process on researcher and participant, and having much to say about the processes and ethics of research and theory itself. To the extent that psychosocial studies is a personal and political endeavour, examining the positions we all take up as psychosocial subjects, this reflexivity is a crucial point: theorising has effects -or, in more humanistic terms, thinking about ourselves is (one hopes) a way of bringing about change.

### **Interest in inter- and transdisciplinary approaches to psychological theory and research.**

This 'principle' is articulated separately to highlight the point that the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of psychosocial studies transgress disciplinary boundaries because of its recognition that these boundaries are not pre-given, but are constantly negotiated as part of a discipline's ideological and political aspirations. Drawing on transdisciplinary approaches means utilising cross-cutting ideas which can deepen as well as challenge psychological understandings. Examples here include models of interpretive work characteristic of literary studies (Andrews et al, 2000), epistemological critique derived from philosophy, postcolonial studies and politics (Segal, forthcoming), and empirical employment of a social constructionist and locally grounded framework characteristic of anthropology (Frosh et al, 2002). These approaches, precisely because they originate outside psychology, offer alternatives to the conventions of empirical study within the discipline; in particular it is from elsewhere that our core methodology, qualitative study, originates. At its narrowest, it means that the assumptions and findings of psychological practice are always queried by possible alternative frames of reference; more broadly, acknowledgement and use of the theories and methods developed in other social sciences and in the humanities is a way of contesting psychology's tendency to absolute truth claims. Models of motivation, representation, desire, and imagination: these are the shared concerns of a wide range of disciplines, each with a tendency to claim privileged information; spinning these various perspectives into and out of each other is a way of keeping the fluid and multiple nature of psychosocial 'reality' in mind.

### **Interest in personal and social change, including psychotherapy.**

Finally, as evidenced by the close relationship between psychological and psychosocial

theories and approaches to psychotherapy (for example, in psychoanalytic psychotherapy or systemic family therapy), there are substantial implications and applications of psychosocial work for personal and social change. Much of psychosocial studies can be reframed as an exploration of the processes of change occurring at personal, microsocial and macrosocial levels, and an examination of the psychological investments both in change and in the resistance to change. What produces difference, empowerment, liberation; or, conversely, what opposes it, why do people remain in love with their chains? These are conventional and fundamental questions within both psychotherapy and social action. However, the psychosocial project here is complicated by the fact that psychotherapeutic practices are by no means uniformly progressive in their politics or in their effects. Indeed, much commentary on psychotherapy, from feminism to critical theory, has been directed at the conformism embedded in its assumptions and practices: adaptational, elitist, ideological, controlling, patriarchal, bourgeois (Frosh, 1999b). That is, there is a real argument that much psychotherapy is embedded within a particular kind of modernist epistemology which assumes the possibility of expertise, integration and individual self-development, and which often brackets out the 'social' aspect of the psychosocial subject. This last 'principle' guiding psychosocial work is therefore phrased very cautiously, not as a *commitment* to any particular way of doing psychotherapy -or even to psychotherapy as a basic good, which it might or might not be- but rather to an *interest* in questions of social and personal change, and how such change occurs (which might be through therapy, but might not) or is resisted (ditto). Amongst other things, this means that historical and area studies are relevant to our work, even though our primary focus is psychological, because examinations of shifts in action and experience over time and place could reveal a great deal about the facilitating and inhibiting conditions for change.

## Making Psychosocial Studies Work

The previous sections of this paper have explored a number of principles for establishing a psychosocial studies approach within psychology, as opposed to the more usual sociological location of such enterprises. It has been argued that there are a number of key psychological assumptions and ideological positions that are ‘deconstructed’ by psychosocial studies, and examples have been given of how this might be done. However, stating a set of principles is one thing, hard enough, but putting them into practice is another. The paucity of psychosocial studies initiatives in psychology is no accident, for there are obvious contextual, if one likes ‘objective’, circumstances to deal with, arising from being situated within an academic department of psychology, yet engaged in work which is often construed as marginal. This has effects in relation to contradictions between directives on how research quality is to be measured (mainly through publications in international peer-refereed journals, on the scientific model, rather than in books and invited book chapters, more characteristic of the humanities and of the theoretical side of the psychosocial studies agenda), difficulties in getting research grants for studies which are not couched in the experimental tradition, and - an ironic double edged sword here- the tendency to attract (and therefore have to find time for) relatively large numbers of graduate students all with their own different ‘marginal’ interests, because there are so few places where they can pursue their studies with sympathetic supervisors. These factors weigh heavily on academics working in the area, but what I want briefly to highlight here are *process* issues which apply *within* our Centre, not because I want to use any public forum to work them out, but rather because they seem to me precisely not to be ‘personal’ but genuinely ‘psychosocial’; that is, they are systematic issues relating to the project in which we are engaged, and they have had a noticeable impact on our actual work.

### **Diversity of research perspectives.**

The first of these issues is a relatively straightforward one: despite all members of the Centre being signed up to a shared project, there is considerable diversity in the range of issues with which we are concerned, and in the perspectives which we bring to bear on them.

Psychoanalysis, phenomenology, systems theory, group analysis, feminism, cultural studies, quantitative and qualitative research -all these are represented in a Centre consisting of a small number of academic staff. Moreover, research interests range across gender and sexuality, 'race', ethnicity and racism, religion, politics, health psychology, psychotherapy and so on. To a greater or lesser extent, all of these are perspectives and issues pressing for representation within psychology and we see ourselves as carriers of them, recognising as problematic psychology's assumption of homogeneity in its content and methods. However, a policy of multiplicity, which might be adopted on a principled basis, creates its own incoherence, raising difficulties for joint work and for the creation of a shared language out of which a powerful psychosocial perspective might emerge. Part of the problem here might be the way in which psychosocial studies, like 'critical psychology', is often defined oppositionally, as filling gaps in, or creating alternatives to, mainstream psychology. The result can be that a wide variety of alternative positions are welcomed in without necessarily any clear sense that they are all contributing to the work of creating a distinctively psychosocial position. The necessity for rigorous theoretical work is again clear from this, alongside willingness to see that psychosocial studies itself is not to be immune from criticism.

### **Creating a setting for joint work and mutual support within an individualistic academic tradition.**

Many academics are deeply invested in their subject material and in their own intellectual



work; it is, after all, their livelihood and also the way in which their worth is measured. With its individualistic promotion and recognition structures and its consequently competitive social ethos, academic life is rife with rivalries and suspicions. Our vision of psychosocial studies is one which recognises, deconstructs and questions this individualism, and instead - partly in relation to our 'marginal/ised' position- seeks to create a setting in which ideas and people can be supported, can find a creative place for themselves in a situation of solidarity. As political groups of all kinds have often found, this is no easy task: differences of status and power in the group create ripples which are difficult to control; people have their legitimate ambitions; resources are scarce, there is a lot of work of the kind that does not necessarily bring advancement; and -more ominously and subtly- there is a scrutinising wider environment in which everyone's performance is continually assessed. Trying to do something productive *together* is made an uphill struggle by many of these wider forces. This is, indeed, precisely part of the critique many critical psychologists would make of academic life, including mainstream psychology: that its individualism militates against the construction of a creatively reflexive psychological discipline; but as with other ideological struggles, doing things differently even within a well-meaning and mutually supportive group of colleagues, is not always a straightforward endeavour. Building on the tradition of psychodynamic research and consultation into organisations (Obholzer and Roberts 1994), a way forward here might lie in intensive scrutiny of the Centre's work processes, with more clarification of the boundaries between professional activity and personal support, plus building alliances across different 'critical' groupings. What has particularly to be addressed is the familiar yet always somehow surprising way that a sense of isolation coupled with idealisations around what can be achieved in the kind of work group represented by our Centre, can lead to devastating disappointment when internal and external obstacles and, particularly, interpersonal conflicts occur.

**Intensity of investment in positions –reflexive and personal/political as well as ‘just’ academic.**

There is an additional complexity created by the kind of psychosocial studies described here, which of course does apply elsewhere but which people working in the way we aspire to have in spades. Not only does our work matter to us in terms of what it might achieve instrumentally (advancement, renown, perhaps more abstractly ‘knowledge’), but it is also commonly *reflexive* work. If, for example, I write about masculinity I am writing about *myself*, so for example my colleagues’ criticism of male posturing and insincerity is *personal* criticism. This also includes stylistic criticism, because one of the very clear ‘discoveries’ in our kind of work is that arguments are not necessarily (or usually) advanced by the presentation of facts, but are mobilised rhetorically and gain compelling force when they address some aspects of experience in a way that feels enriching or exciting -or fits the times and its ideologies (Billig, 1991). With so much at stake, it is not always easy to find ways to engage in critical discussion which results in people feeling held and encouraged rather than bruised, without also creating potentially new coercive norms. This is especially so because, as implied in the previous section, the wider context of academic work is one in which bruising others is often taken as a sign of virility, a kind of intellectual machismo. Our experience here is that it is important to carefully graduate discussions, if possible devising new shared projects into which ideas can be fed, rather than to move too quickly to the presentation and debate of individuals’ ideas or research. The consequence of too much optimism about how quickly open criticism can be tolerated, can be a breakdown rather than a forging of trust, and a replication of the competitiveness which groups such as ours strive to contest. That such groups often carry split-off ideals and anxieties about destructiveness for the wider institutional context (in this case, psychology departments, which have striking ambivalence towards their ‘softer’ sides) adds to the intensity of this dynamic.

**Where is the ‘join’ in ‘psychosocial’ –is it in the merging of the psychological and the social, or is it a terrain on its own?**

Finally, there is a set of issues surrounding the ‘subject matter’ of psychosocial studies, already described or at least hinted at earlier. The idea of the psychosocial *subject* as a meeting-point of inner and outer forces, something *constructed* yet *constructing*, a power-using subject which is also subject to power, is a difficult subject to theorise, and no-one has yet worked it out. How much of an individual subject is there, if such a question is meaningful? What are the primary social forces and how do they position the subject? What does it mean to say that we have ‘inner lives’; is this something irreducible, or a fantasy, metaphor or allegory? When we draw on poststructuralism and postmodernism to try to engage with these questions, are we losing ourselves in abstractions which are themselves fantasies of conquest -the true knowledge that will liberate? These are real questions, indexing significant differences between people who all see themselves as working psychosocially. Psychology is so heavily embedded in a vision making the individual primary, and there are such apparently good ethical, moral and scientific reasons for seeing things this way, that rethinking it not just to ‘take account of’ the social but to see the social as what constructs the personal, without losing sight of the ‘realness’ of that personal domain, is a vastly difficult task. The problem with work that is more than just ‘problem solving’, is that while emotionally one is often desperate for solutions to urgent and substantial difficulties (for example psychological suffering in the context of war, migration, hardship, abuse), one has often to be reconciled to continuing, naggingly unanswered questions. Psychosocial studies testifies repeatedly to the pervasiveness of complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty, as seems bound to be the case when one gives priority to the ‘meaning making’ endeavours of people sometimes struggling with difficult situations (in our research,

including sexual abusiveness and decisions over genetic screening –Emerson and Frosh, 2001; Chapman and Smith, 2002).

## Conclusion

This paper has presented some principles for psychosocial studies in the context of psychology and also described some inhibitions to progress in this area. Some of these inhibitions are structural, related to the discontinuity between the assumptions characteristic of academic psychology and those of psychosocial studies. Other inhibitions relate to the problems of marginality and idealisation endemic to attempts to ‘do psychology differently’ within an academic context in which the dominant values are individualism and a restricted mode of scrutinising intellectual worth. Nevertheless, the material presented here, with examples from the work of the Birkbeck Centre for Psychosocial Studies and from elsewhere, suggests that there is considerable scope for development of a psychosocial studies approach addressing conceptual and practical issues in psychology from a critical perspective.

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