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Articulating psychoanalysis and psychosocial studies: limitations and possibilities

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Title: Articulating Psychoanalysis and Psychosocial Studies: Limitations and Possibilities

Abstract:

Of the limitations and possibilities raised by Frosh and Baraitser's discussion of psychoanalysis and psychosocial studies, three themes are particularly deserving of further attention. The first concerns the epistemological and ethical break that divides psychoanalysis' clinical praxis from its role as a means of qualitative or interview methodology. A second deals with the status of psychoanalytic discourse as a touchstone of authority, as a 'master's discourse'. Debating such problems opens up two possible routes of methodological enquiry: the potential of using psychoanalysis, following Parker (2008), as a means of subverting effects of mastery, individuality and truth, and the idea of focusing on libidinal economy rather than on individual subjects when it comes to combining textual and psychoanalytic forms of analysis. The paper closes by discussing the notion of a trans-individual unconscious, proposing that psychoanalysis and psychosocial studies might find some common ground with reference to the Lacanian idea of the unconscious as the subjective locus of the Other.

Keywords: libidinal economy; trans-individual unconscious; Other

Articulating psychoanalysis and psychosocial studies: Limitations and possibilities

Derek Hook

Introduction

Frosh and Baraitser identify at least three prospective impasses in their astute observations regarding the hope of articulating psychoanalysis and psychosocial studies. The first of these concerns the epistemological and ethical break that divides psychoanalysis' clinical praxis from its role as a means of qualitative or interview methodology. A second point of conflict concerns the status of psychoanalytic discourse as a touchstone of authority and knowledge, as - ironically enough for a theory of the subversion of rationality - a mode of certainty, a 'master's discourse'. The discussion of such problems opens up two possible routes of methodological enquiry: the potential of using psychoanalysis, following Parker (2008), to subvert effects of mastery, individuality and truth, and the idea of focusing on libidinal economy rather than on individual subjects when it comes to combining textual and psychoanalytic forms of analysis. A third impasse involves discussion over a workable notion of the unconscious that may viably link psychosocial and psychoanalytic studies. I will begin with the first of these themes - the disjunction between the clinic and the realm of qualitative research - because it represents an issue where I am in complete agreement with Frosh and Baraitser.

Overstretching the clinic

Frosh and Baraitser do well to point out the difficulties inherent in the attempt to replicate the clinical technology of psychoanalysis in non-clinical environments. There is no doubt that psychoanalysis brings a distinctive conceptual frame and a powerful distancing procedure - indeed, a potentially subversive reading and listening 'methodology' - to the work of critique. One need remain vigilant, however, toward the epistemological and ethical disjunction that accompanies attempts to apply

psychoanalysis' clinical forms beyond the confines of the clinic. The case of ostensibly 'expert' psychoanalytic interpretations made of others (colleagues, research participants, etc.), from the position of implicit mastery (as in the case of published commentary), makes for a case in point.

I would argue that not even the position of analyst within the clinical frame automatically warrants a complete interpretative latitude. We know that for Freud, despite the dazzling interpretative displays in his written work, a dream interpretation can only be definitive, 'authorized', by the dreamers themselves. The Lacanian procedure of enigmatic, oracular interpretative interventions – which often take the form of question-posing performative gestures rather than actual comments – likewise flies in the face of a clinician's prerogative to offer definitive interpretations. If one accepts that sense-making and understanding often function - much like the apparent illuminations of interpretation itself - as means of defence, as easy forms of closure or resolution, then we appreciate how such processes undo analytical work which should precisely *take us further and further into unknowing*.

We might admit that psychoanalytic interpretation remains always poised on the verge of wild analysis. This, it would seem, is the inherent epistemic risk posed by a discipline that hopes to trace the unconscious in its most unlikely and absurd manifestations. If this is indeed the case, then the factors of supervision, clinical technique, the provision of an appropriate ethical code, and the contextualization of a detailed and ongoing (week-by-week, year-by-year) life-history – that is, precisely those factors which in part define the clinic – are all of absolute necessity. It is thus difficult to see how one can justifiably extend clinical psychoanalytic warrants (such as diagnosis and interpretation of individuals) beyond the parameters of the clinic.

Libidinal economy

The non-generalizability of psychoanalytic clinical intervention beyond the clinic does not suggest that we have reached a dead-end with regard to how psychoanalytic procedures might be linked to textual analytic work. To the contrary, I believe there are at least two under-explored strategies deserving of

further attention in this respect. The first concerns the move, evident in instances of postcolonial criticism, to employ the vocabulary of psychoanalytic description to apprehend certain systematic patterns and operations occurring within a given discursive formation. Rather than settling on individual subjects and their particular diagnostics or dynamics, such an analytic targets the *libidinal economy of a given discourse*. Such an approach, referring back to Freud's (1921) libidinal economy of the mass in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, remains irreducibly social in its focus. Libidinal economy is a fundamental vector of group identification: the push-pull cohesion of its ego-ideal and ideal-ego dynamics is precisely what for Freud proved constitutive of social bonds. It would seem in this respect that the proposed articulation between psychoanalysis and discourse/textual analysis (or psychosocial studies more generally) might profit more from the approach of Freud's group psychology than from his clinical procedures.

The analysis of the libidinal economy underlying specific discursive formations would move us away from the attempt to grasp the unconscious of any individual subject. It proposes a non-reductive analytical strategy, asserting that discourses themselves maintain the coherence, the repetitiveness - indeed, the cycles of *jouissance* - that mark certain well-established patterns of libidinal functioning, a strategy which does not attempt to fix such discursive patterns as merely the outcome of intra-psychic processes, of individual psychopathology. The colonial stereotype, for Bhabha (2004), for example, is seen to accord, in all its insistence, its defensiveness and precariousness, with the libidinal economy of fetishism. Similarly, in Fanon (1967) we find an argument according to which the ambivalent vacillations of racist discourse might be usefully analyzed along the lines of the libidinal economy of phobia. Coetzee (1991), furthermore, has examined how facets of apartheid ideology - ideology at the level of community and nation - might productively be understood as exemplifying the libidinal patterns of obsessionality, along with its associated strategies of fantasy and metonymic displacement, enabling thus an understanding of the longevity of apartheid's 'malaise of reason'.

It is not difficult to see how certain psychoanalytic concepts usefully inform such an approach. The assumption here is, to give an example, that the effective functioning of any discursive formation

necessarily entails particular master-signifiers (or ‘empty signifiers’ to use Laclau’s (1996) term), that is, nodal-points in the discourse which can never be definitely fixed or exhausted. These nodal points remain somehow open, but they anchor meaning (as in the case of appeals to ‘Science’, ‘psychoanalysis’, ‘Truth’ etc.) and organize the ideological field. In much the same vein, one might attempt to identify certain sublime or privileged objects, fantasmatic object-causes of desire, points around which a discourse pivots. I have in mind here the role of certain precious (*objet petit a*) objects, which contain a *je ne sais quoi* quality, something ‘in them more than themselves’, and hence take on a disproportionate libidinal status by virtue of the degree of investment of a given community. Similarly, one might identify the defensive procedures of a discourse, questioning how it operates a particular modality of negation following on from the Freudian intuition that different forms of negation can be linked to distinctive libidinal patterns: repression in the case of neurosis, disavowal in the case of perversion, foreclosure in the case of psychosis. Paul Gilroy’s (2004) analysis of contemporary Britishness, for example, reveals a dynamics of selective aggrandizement and amnesia, an awkward juxtaposition of a repressed colonial past existing alongside imperatives to rejuvenate a vision of British greatness. The resulting cultural conjunction, he concludes, is one that exhibits all the patterns of neurotic blockage, repetition and ambivalence, particularly in view of its attempted adjustment to the challenges of multicultural society.

Apprehending the libidinal economy of given discourses might enable us to answer questions along the lines of why certain signifiers come to be locked into patterns of repetition; why some are particularly historically-persistent, ‘sticky’, difficult to shake; why others are so volatile and anxious, short-circuiting reason to attain more immediately affective responses. It may likewise assist us in understanding why still other signifiers are so quickly dissipated, failing to gain the investment, the ‘volume’, the affective hegemony of those more effectively enjoyed by a given community.

Psychoanalytic procedure against psychoanalysis

A second possibility regarding the use of psychoanalytic methodology for qualitative research can be read out of Parker's (2008) Lacanian application of psychoanalysis against psychoanalysis, that is, his elaboration of Lacan's (2007) injunctions against the multiple lures of mastery, individuality and truth which stem from treating psychoanalysis as an idealized form of knowledge. There are moments in such an application of psychoanalysis, in the investigation of particular discursive structures (of the master, the university, the hysteric, the analytic), where an ostensibly Lacanian engagement feels Foucauldian, certainly so inasmuch as it pertains to particular historical situations, locates specific structural speaking-positions of dominance and proves able to pin-point both what is effectively produced and barred by such discursive structures or social ties (Lacan, 2007; Žižek, 2004).

Parker, like Frosh and Baraitser, is alive to the particular discursive capital that comes with speaking from the position of psychoanalytic mastery. This is a longstanding issue: how psychoanalysis works within culture as a 'trump discourse' able to authorize particular discursive warrants (interpretation, the prerogative to discern the unconscious dimension of everyday explanations), exclusions (merely rational forms of knowledge as superficial) and truth-effects (its constructions of the deep truths of human subjectivity). Who in this respect can forget Foucault's (1977) analysis of the psy-disciplines as possessed of an implicit moral force, and of psychoanalysis in particular (1978) as, in Frosh and Baraitser's words, "an expert system that has access to [an] inner world and knows what it is like, and posits it as something that exists in and of itself"? In response to this, one can only evoke Parker's (2008) Lacanian insistence that psychoanalytic procedures should be applied precisely against the discursive effects of truth, mastery, individuality, that such subversive reading strategies be opposed to the formation and/or productions of any master's discourse, even if that discourse is psychoanalysis itself.

Frosh and Baraitser make a parallel move to Parker's in calling upon reflexivity as a means of destabilizing such hegemonic formations within the aspirant 'trans-disciplinarity' of psychosocial studies. There is a faint equivocation here: reflexivity is first evoked as a means of subversion, as a safeguard of criticality; as their argument progresses, however, the claim to reflexivity is itself

scrutinized as an inadequate mark of critical distance. With the latter argument I can only agree: inasmuch as reflexivity involves a type of ego-judgement on its own productions, it cannot but be part of the problem, a means of insulating the *méconnaissance* of ego-misrecognition within a closed-circuit. Neither the perspective I have on my own perspective, nor my co-researcher's input on my own input, entails an adequate degree of otherness; for reflexivity to work, a far more radical break, a more forceful discontinuity needs to be introduced. I agree with Frosh and Baraitser that psychoanalysis precisely as a procedure *for not understanding*, as means of pinpointing what is Other in my own commonplace constructions, holds some promise here. Psychoanalysis however is not our only answer: for Foucault such a generation of discontinuity typically takes the genealogical form of neglected histories; for cultural and social theory this often takes the form of an unceasing exploration of different theoretical languages, registers of engagement, modes of critique.

The trans-individual unconscious

This discussion of disjunction, discontinuity and Otherness leads us into the topic of the unconscious, and of what version thereof might suit both psychoanalysis and psychosocial studies. There is an interesting footnote toward the end of one of Slavoj Žižek's (1994) essays on ideology in which he insists that

...the concept of the unconscious is to be conceived in the strictly Freudian sense, as 'trans-individual' – that is, beyond the ideological opposition of 'individual' and 'collective' unconscious: the subject's unconscious is always grounded in the transferential relationship towards the Other; it is always 'external' with regard to the subject's monadic existence.

(1994, p 33)

Chiesa (2007) likewise draws attention to the idea of a trans-individual unconscious which can be collapsed neither into intrasubjectivity (the unconscious as “the Other within me”) nor into intersubjectivity (the unconscious as the Other subject):

The idea of an “individual” unconscious – on which both intra- and intersubjective accounts of the unconscious are based makes sense only if the Symbolic [the realm of law, language, socio-symbolic functioning] is associated with the Imaginary [the ego-domain of idealizing identifications and rivalry]. More importantly, we should emphasize . . . [the] unconscious understood as the universal, nonindividuated *Other of language* (which...relies on the linguistic notion of the signifier and the structural laws that govern it)... [W]hat appears – from an imaginary standpoint – to be the “individual” unconscious of one given subject cannot be dissociated from language as such. It is in this sense that the unconscious is at times said to lie “outside” the subject . . . Lacan’s transindividual unconscious . . . [thus] corresponds to a symbolic *signifying* structure. (Chiesa, 2007, pp 43-44).

Grasping such a trans-individual notion of the unconscious is an imperative for the further articulation of psychoanalysis and psychosocial studies. It would enable us better to comprehend the failure and disruption, the very lack of self-transparency that proves constitutive of the subject’s emergence as an *enunciating* subject of desire. Any instance of meaning-making, of discourse in operation, brings with it such impediments, such un-intentions and ambiguities simply by virtue of the fact that they are played out in a social field in which statement and enunciation, intended meaning and performative utterance, are never one and the same.

Without some acknowledgement of this dimension of rupture and discontinuity, of the ‘over-intention’ of desire at work within language, we would seem necessarily to come up short in our attempts to apprehend the functioning of discourse and subjectivity alike. A properly trans-individual

notion of the unconscious is one which in many ways seems commensurate with discursive, or broadly 'post-structural' approaches that emphasize the role of social structure and the conditions under which 'the subject is spoken'. This is unconscious as signifying structure, as *operation* (as in Freud's dreamwork) of condensation and displacement, an unconscious, put bluntly, evidenced only *in the operation of the signifier*.

Within such a trans-individual conceptualization the unconscious cannot be understood as merely an intra-psychic function; it needs to be apprehended as the outcome of the structural constraints within which the social act of speaking or making discourse must occur. Such a non-psychological perspective on the unconscious targets the functioning of the signifier and the structure of language, jettisoning notions of depth, internality and hidden primal/repressed contents in accordance with Frosh and Baraitser's characterization of "not down and deep...but out and wide". The unconscious in this respect is, to quote the well-known Lacanian dictum, 'the discourse of the Other', a designation emphasizing that the unconscious must always be approached in relation to the trans-subjective social order of the big Other. Seshadri-Crooks (2000) makes this argument to great effect: the unconscious must not be grasped as a subterranean space opposed to consciousness, as an inchoate, swirling mass of repressed contents, but rather as *the subjective locus of the Other or the symbolic order*.

Seshadri-Crooks surveys a series of Lacan's postulates on the unconscious to draw the following conclusions: the unconscious is not a primal, archaic function; it is not a set of unorganized drives or repressed contents; it should not be viewed as a collection of an individual's prohibited memories and desires. She (2000) points to Lacan's crucial qualification of Freudian doctrine, namely the idea that it is not *affects* that are repressed, but the *ideational representatives* of affects, which Lacan understands within the rubric of the signifier. Hence Lacan's procedural focus on the unconscious as occurring within the actions of speech, the idea that the Lacanian unconscious *precisely is* the processes of signification beyond the control of the speaking subject. This is an external rather than internal unconsciousness, activated in the operations and performances of language, in the subject's grappling with their place - relative to the Other's desire - in the symbolic order.

I have tried elsewhere (2008) to develop the transference dimension emphasized by the above Žižek quote, to expand upon the fact of an ongoing ‘fantasmatic transaction’ whereby subjects are constantly preoccupied with the task of fathoming their place in the social order via the ‘*Che vuoi?*’ formula repetitively posed to the big Other (“*What do you want?*”, “*What am I to you?*”, “*What must I be?*”). Žižek has done much to drive home the point that this alienating pattern of questioning - in which the subject is continually overridden, ‘determined’ by the operation of the signifier - occurs everywhere in the political domain. This is where I will end, by posing an agenda that I take to be of primary importance in thinking psychoanalysis and psychosocial studies together: the need to connect questions of a trans-individual unconscious - and indeed, of libidinal economy - to theoretical, discursive and empirical analyses of how power and ideology function in the public realm today.

About the author

Derek Hook is a lecturer in Social Psychology at the London School of Economics and a research fellow at the University of the Witwatersrand. The over-arching focus of his research concerns the attempt to develop an ‘analytics of power’ sufficiently able to grapple with the unconscious and psychological dimensions of racism and ideological subjectivity. He is the author of *Foucault, Psychology & the Analytics of Power* (Palgrave, 2007), and the editor of *Critical Psychology* (University of Cape Town Press, 2004). He is one of the founding editors of the journal *Subjectivity*, and the coordinator of Psychoanalysis@LSE, a multi-disciplinary research group aiming to further the use of psychoanalysis as a means of social and political analysis.

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