

Turning psychosocial? Towards a UK network. Wendy Hollway

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This two-day event was organised in December 2007. The original idea was initiated on a flight back from Dubrovnik where Lynn Froggett and I had attended an annual workshop of a European group of academics called the International Research Group for Psycho-Societal Analysis (IRGfPSA); a group that has evolved out of a common interest in qualitative empirical research that bridges the dualistic divide between social/societal and psychological/psychoanalytic approaches to real-world questions. This European group specialises in small group in-depth analysis of data brought from members' research, usually drawing on psychoanalytic principles. Likewise in the UK, there is a growing tradition of using psychoanalysis to critically inform empirical qualitative research, both theoretically and methodologically¹. Lynn Froggett and I thought that there was a small but significant movement towards psychosocial approaches in British social sciences and decided that an event aimed at establishing a network might attract a number of people in academic positions who could explore the benefits of being members of a network. Stephen Frosh and Sasha Roseneil, from the Centre for Psychosocial Research at Birkbeck college, University of London joined the organising group and Birkbeck provided the venue.

In the event, the interest in this event exceeded our expectations. Seventy people attended but if we had not capped numbers, it might have been over one hundred. We also limited the initial constituency to academics, whereas future events might attract practitioners, including psychotherapists and organisational and group consultants. We capped numbers largely because of our concern to pay attention to the process of our deliberations. We wanted to create spaces where people could engage in open exploration, minimally structured by a time frame and stated tasks for different sessions. There were only two sessions with formal content. At the beginning of the first day, four speakers, all with long experience of psychosocial approaches and representing different emphases, gave short introductions to situate the psychosocial (see website). At the beginning of day two, a session was dedicated to presentations by the institutional groups who identify as psychosocial, a surprisingly large total of nine (again see website). These groups have in common critical, interdisciplinary approaches encompassing between them empirical research, teaching (a range of students from undergraduates to professionals in health and social care) and applied interventions in collaboration with public services. There were also many individuals in universities who were relatively isolated and valued the chance to make connections with others sharing a psychosocial perspective.

In the past thirty years or so in the UK there have been several critical movements (intellectual and political) that have addressed the problem of individual-social dualism: feminism, poststructuralism, critical psychology and the critique of positivism that drew from all of these. Along with older traditions of sociology that

¹ For example, a large government-funded research programme entitled Identities and Social Action (www.identities.org.uk) contains at least six projects that are broadly psychosocial in approach: Hollway and Phoenix, Clarke and Garner, Walkerdine and Fairbrother, Thomson and Kehily, Skeggs and Wood and Reay et al.

problematized agency and the role of individuals, these and the critiques they generated, have contributed to enabling the current conjuncture that has resulted in movements towards a psychosocial perspective. A minimal definition of the psychosocial that perhaps everybody could subscribe to is an approach (for research, teaching and intervention) that does not reduce either to the individual or the social, as has been characteristic of disciplinary approaches in social sciences. Beyond this, we purposely wanted to leave definitions open, not least to embrace and explore differences that abound in such a gathering.

After a large portion of twentieth century history during which British academic traditions were largely split off from clinical psychoanalytic practice and training, psychoanalysis was re-embraced often via continental European intellectual traditions, because it provided a resource for understanding the role of the subject and subjectivity in social change where positivist psychology had largely failed. Many critical psychologists and social and cultural theorists turned to versions of psychoanalysis, but to different traditions within it. From the 1970s, cultural theorists drew on Lacanian theory, while object relations theory was drawn on by small pockets of psychoanalytic sociologists and more recently by those pursuing empirically orientated psychosocial research. Meanwhile psychoanalytic thought has become more critical and more relational, so affording better resources for psychosocial understanding. There are nevertheless many psychosocial academics who remain critical of psychoanalysis, often through the lens of a post-structuralist critique of its implication in oppressive power-knowledge-practice relations; academics who reject any notion of unconscious dynamics and regard subjectivity as adequately explained by idea of subject positioning dialogically in discourses and practices. This is one set of differences that we hardly began to explore at the event (but they can be recognised in the website material from the various institutional groups).

For the readership of *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, a journal largely defined in a North American tradition, I would say that the UK label psychosocial does not by definition include psychoanalysis (although for some, like me, there is no better or more creative way of understanding the 'psyche' side of this concept). I would further identify a difference from US traditions drawing mainly either on American relational psychoanalysis or on Lacanian concepts used in a Humanities-based tradition of cultural theory. By contrast, in the UK, psychosocial understanding has grown up largely in Faculties of Social Science and drawn primarily (though not exclusively) on British Object Relations psychoanalysis (notably Klein, Bion and Winnicott). The network has been initially defined to include only academics and doctoral students (although this includes a few psychoanalytic psychotherapists and clinical psychologists who identify themselves as psychosocial). Within the psychosocial network, there is a recognised need to theorise the social in more refined ways too, including discourses, structures, institutions and relations. The alarming absence, until a decade or two ago, of bodies in sociological theory (excepting the idea of bodies as socially or culturally constructed) has also signalled the need for less dualistic rejection of biological-social dualism, but there is considerable wariness of the 'bio-psycho-social' commonly used uncritically in health research, because the label offers no way of conceptualising these relations, just adding them together.

I have said that the organising group wanted to create a structure that was open enough to afford lots of dialogue and also that would enable attention to the process of our deliberations. To this end the other sessions were all unstructured within the time frame and broad parameters of the aims of the event and themes within it. Three small group sessions (six groups of 12 retaining the same membership over the three meetings) seemed to many worryingly open at first. After all, academics are used to conferences where the vast majority of the time is pre-structured with individual speakers, often permitting little subsequent dialogue. In order to help these small groups to function well, their numbers were capped at 12 and a facilitator was appointed in each group (also a notetaker). The six organising themes (to prompt rather than constrain discussion) were formulated by the organisers as follows:

- How are psychosocial studies constituted as a transdisciplinary field?
- What is their relation to psychology and sociology and what is the role of psychoanalysis?
- What epistemology and ontology inform psychosocial inquiry and how do they inform research methods?
- Is there a distinctive psychosocial pedagogy and what are its principles and practices?
- What does a psychosocial approach offer to applied fields and what does it draw from them?
- What might be a genealogy of an emergent psychosocial tradition?

In the final - feedback and planning – session, the extended opportunity for thematic discussion in a group with a stable membership was identified as one of the successes of the event.

Each day, a group session consisting of the plenary group was held with the overarching tasks of encouraging the articulation of similarities and differences in our approaches to the psychosocial across the various groups who are identifying as working in this domain and working towards creating an intellectual community in psychosocial studies in the UK. An experienced consultant was hired to help this large group to reflect on its own process as it pursued the tasks. One theme that emerged at the event was a discussion of the value of using different size groups to explore group and institutional processes reflexively. Many attendees, particularly younger ones, had no experience of this tradition and to start with were perplexed by the open structure lacking the usual containing props of formal roles and the pre-structured filling of time and not everyone was comfortable with the inclusion of an experiential group session, or thought that it was useful.

The ‘group relations’ tradition (associated with the work of Bion) and the group analytic tradition (originating in the work of Foulkes) had a significant history in the middle decades of the twentieth century but group dynamic approaches had largely retreated by the end of the 1970s, and have been little used within psychosocial approaches. The Kleinian-informed concept of social defences against anxiety (Menzies-Lyth), part of a Tavistock-based approach to understanding groups and institutions in the 1950s and 1960s, was mentioned by two introductory speakers at the event (as it was by Valerie Walkerdine at the 2007 APCS conference). To conceptualise psychoanalytic processes at group and institutional levels is rather different from the American relational tradition that has emphasised the dyadic encounter within the clinical hour as its model for moving from intra- to inter-psychic.

The psychoanalytic interpretation of group experiences could perhaps take on a new identity now, informed by the exciting developments within and outside psychoanalysis (developments we would broadly label psychosocial). For example, the concept of reflexivity has variously developed in post-modern, psychoanalytic and qualitative feminist research. The reflexive use of one's own subjectivity is a resource central to contemporary clinical psychoanalytic practice (often under the heading of countertransference). Some psychosocial approaches see the potential of applying this outside clinical setting, consistent with the extension of the concept of countertransference to apply to unconscious relational dynamics outside the clinical encounter.

In the final plenary session of the event (which I have avoided calling a conference) there was excellent task-related discussion about how to move this network forward. In a fairly hostile higher education climate, we can use it to provide support for groups and individuals. We can remain open to different versions of the psychosocial and enable the initiation of events based on themes that will interest smaller constituencies within the network. We shall enable virtual communication through website and discussion list. What this network achieves and how it develops further remains open, based on whatever time, energy and interest are available from individuals and institutional groups. There are clearly areas of common interest between the British psychosocial network, the APCS and the (European) IRGfPSA, with which I began this report.

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