

Commentary

Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society (2008) **13**, 366–373. doi:10.1057/pcs.2008.24

What is “The Psychosocial”? A Response to Frosh and Baraitser

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Abstract

This article argues that Frosh and Baraitser's examination of the state of psychosocial studies in Britain is largely a critique of the kind of Kleinian-influenced psychosocial work associated with Wendy Hollway and me. It also argues that the alternative, Lacanian direction proposed by Frosh and Baraitser is wrong-headed because it effectively eliminates the psychic dimension. Against their espousal of the Lacanian notion, captured in the image of the Moebius strip, that the social and the psychological cannot be separated, I reiterate the need to hold on to a distinction between the social (the “out-there”) and the psychic (the “in-here”). I then show how Cavalletto's (non-Kleinian) re-examination of Freud, Weber, Adorno and Elias as psychosocial thinkers supports this view and suggest that the real issue, as it has always been, is how to produce concepts that have explanatory power at both the social and the psychological levels without, thereby, eliminating the unique dimension of each level.

Keywords:

“in-here”/“out-there”, Moebius strip, Kleinian, Lacanian, Cavalletto

The paper by Frosh and Baraitser purports to be an examination of the state of psychosocial studies in Britain “from the position of sympathetic criticism both of psychosocial studies and of psychoanalysis.” In the event, it is largely a critique of the kind of Kleinian-influenced psychosocial studies that characterize the work of Wendy Hollway. Since my work with Wendy Hollway is also subjected to criticism, I take it that my very similar ontological and methodological assumptions (in my other psychosocial work) are also included in their critical sights. I say this despite the fact that many of the critical remarks are of a general

nature, addressed to no named person, or, rather, to straw people. When it comes to exemplifying the faults of the psychosocial research of which they disapprove, however, these are taken, almost exclusively, from Hollway or Hollway and Jefferson. For that reason, the criticism seems to be directed at us, at least implicitly. Thus, directly or implicitly, we are accused, variously, of being: “pious,” too certain, proselytizers, unproductively engaged (by implication), “moral high ground” takers, implausible (by implication), “rather predictable,” developmental determinists, sanitisers of psychoanalysis, relentlessly optimistic, “naïve or external” in relation to our interviewees (by implication), schematic and “strained and potentially misleading” in our use of psychoanalytic ideas about countertransference, and less “cautious and persuasive” than Marks and Monich-Marks. The sympathetic part of the critique seems to consist of the occasional qualifier, like the “laudable” impulse to “oppose mainstream, normalizing research,” which feels a bit like the A for effort tagged on to a report card otherwise full of Cs. That I do not recognize much, if any, of this seems less important than what is at stake in our differences. So I will be focusing on that and on why I think the direction Frosh and Baraitser propose for psychosocial studies is the wrong one.

Against our many errors, Frosh and Baraitser propose a direction that is Lacanian, reflexive, disruptive, and concerned to reveal nonmeaning rather than meaning. This view of the psychosocial is derived from, or at least consonant with, they argue, the image of the Moebius strip where “underside and topside, inside and outside flow together as one, just like the decision as to whether to look at the subject from a ‘social’ or ‘psychological’ perspective.” There Frosh and Baraitser are in contrast to Hollway, who “continues to situate herself in the position of looking for mechanisms which will link the ‘out-there’ with the ‘in-here’.” As we shall see, these contrasting notions of how to conceptualize the psychosocial lie at the heart of our differences. But, to make this case, I need to deal first with the proposed Lacanian turn, where the interest in reflexivity, disruption and nonmeaning is obviously intended as the opposite of Kleinian proselytizing, sanitizing, optimistic and predictable certainties.

Let me start with a key quotation from Parker, which Frosh and Baraitser cite approvingly, to exemplify “psychosocial practices of discourse analysis” inspired by Lacan: “The reflexive position of the discourse analyst is an issue here, for when one approaches a text in hermeneutic mode as something we can ‘understand’ because it is like our own framework (or even because we recognize it as being the mirror opposite of what is familiar to us), this, for Lacanians, would betray the stance we are taking as lying on ‘the line of the Imaginary’ (imagining that we interpret from outside the text). The task of an analyst is to work on ‘the line of the Symbolic’ (working within the domain of the text), and to open up the text by disrupting and disorganizing it so that its functions become clearer, including its functions for us.”

Although Frosh and Baraitser recognize the problem with this quote “when faced with the *clinical* reality of the distress brought to psychoanalysis by clients,” I challenge its theoretical adequacy as an exemplar of psychosocial work. If we can work only “on the line of the Symbolic” and can never understand “the line of the Imaginary,” we can never, in my view,

be properly psychosocial. The psychosocial task must be to try to grasp the relation – in these Lacanian terms – between the Imaginary and the Symbolic. Remaining within the Symbolic is to remain within the realm of the social. In this reading of Lacan, he is not properly psychosocial – something that can also be said of many whom Frosh and Baraitser list as the “heroines and heroes” of those interested in psychosocial analysis: for example, “Foucault, Butler, Althusser, Hall.” Although extremely influential, such figures routinely fail my psychosocial test: Foucault, for example, is not psychosocial because his subjects are essentially the amalgam of the subject positions (in discourse) that they adopt; and Althusser is not because his subjects are interpellated (or hailed) by ideology but do not interpellate. Here, then, is an important difference between our positions.

This understanding of the psychosocial is not a temporary blip but a persistent position, with Parker one of its leading lights, apparently, since also quoted approvingly is his idea that the point of a Lacanian analysis is to bring “the subject to the point where they are a perfect Saussurean, such that they recognize that the language that bears them is made up only of differences without any positive terms”. Where is the psyche in this jumble of signifiers that “bears them” (a term, unintentionally or not, that cannot fail to bring to mind Althusser's very unpsychosocial notion of people as “bearers” of ideology)? Let us hope that the cheque for the analyst was also made out “without any positive terms.”

Later, this difference (between the Kleinians and the Lacanians) is spelt out in relation to research. For Frosh and Baraitser, “[r]esearch is not a process of uncovering (even relative) ‘truths’ about people, but rather exposes the ways in which subjects are positioned by the theoretical structures used (by them as well as researchers) to understand them.” The Foucaultian expression, “positioned by theoretical structures,” once again gives the game away; for this is a social, not a psychosocial, concept. Bourdieu (someone else who is definitively not part of my psychosocial canon) is also quoted approvingly when he talks of the researcher/subject relationship as being “determined by the social structure itself.” This traditional notion would certainly find favor among sociologists, but it is hardly psychosocial.

Finally, another quotation from Parker, on subjectivity, is also used approvingly: “Psychoanalytic subjectivity – our sense of ourselves as having hidden childhood desires and destructive wishes – is the perfect complement to economic exploitation in capitalist society, for both succeed in making victims blame themselves.” Not only are those characteristics of psychoanalysis and capitalism that I do not recognize (do we blame ourselves for things that we usually do not fully understand?), if the notion of complementarity is true, it erases the psychosocial problematic – which is all about the tensions, conflicts and disjunctions between the psychic and the social. As Jacqueline Rose rightly put it, when discussing gender, “What distinguishes psychoanalysis from sociological accounts of gender ... is that whereas for the latter, the internalization of norms is assumed roughly to work, the basic premise and indeed starting point of psychoanalysis is that it does not. The unconscious constantly reveals the “failure” of identity. Because there is no continuity of psychic life, so there is no stability of sexual identity, no position for women (or for men) which is ever

simply achieved.' (**Rose, 1983**, p 9)"

This brings me back to the problem of the Moebius strip image, for this, too, collapses the psychic and the social such that there is ultimately nothing to be explained. Until comparatively recently, Frosh himself saw matters differently. In an earlier paper, similarly dedicated to thinking through the psychosocial relation, Frosh concluded thus: "The social is [always] 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.' (**Frosh, 2003**, p 1555)"

That is very similar to the formulation that Frosh and Baraitser now disapprovingly attribute to Wendy Hollway. There is, of course, nothing wrong with changing one's mind. But, in this particular case, given the strength of the current rejection of the above formulation, it seems imperative to explain the reason for so doing. It is, of course, true that, in reality, there is only behavior: an act or series of acts. But, in order to think the multiplicity of the motivational sources of such act or acts, I find that the idea of the psychosocial, of there being a psychic and a social dimension, is an important heuristic device. It is because such behavior makes no motivational sense when construed only in relation to a conscious mind or intent that Freud's charting of the conflicted and conflictual unconscious dynamics was the important discovery that it was. Thereafter, all kinds of unconsciously motivated behavior, characterized generically as "the symptom," enabled interpretation to move beyond what was said – a jumble of signifiers – to what it meant. Psychoanalysis does not always get it right and may not cure its patients, but it is, to my mind, a quest for meaning, an attempt to move the patient beyond the disabling incomprehensibility of neurotic unhappiness to the (more) enabling understanding of normal human unhappiness, to use Freud's own, realistic, formulation. Psychosocial research is similarly motivated: it attempts to move from lesser (reductive: purely psychological or purely sociological) to greater understandings (more complex: recognizing both psychically unique and socially contingent elements) of social phenomena. As we, **Gadd and I (2007)**, recently expressed it: "Conceptualizing this psychosocial subject non-reductively implies that the complexities of both the inner and the outer world are taken seriously. Taking the social world seriously means thinking about questions to do with structure, power and discourse...Taking the inner world seriously involves an engagement with contemporary psychoanalytic theorizing because only there, in our view, are unconscious as well as conscious processes, and the resulting conflicts and contradictions among reason, anxiety and desire, subjected to any sustained, critical attention. (p 4)"

In other words, the psychosocial subject is always social and always biographical; and, linking the two, determining which subject positions are adopted and which rejected or which interpellations are taken up and which are not, is the idea of investment. In Kleinian terms, one principal source of investment appears to be anxiety.

Cavalletto's work (2007) supports my view that the Moebius strip image is unhelpful. Looking at how four important theorists, namely, Freud, Weber, Adorno and Elias, connect the psychic and the social, Cavalletto sees himself as returning to “a discarded tradition” (p 1), and very much as part of the recent psychosocial (re)turn. He is certainly no Kleinian, a point to which I shall return. With all four authors, however, he is unafraid to see “the psychic and the social” as “two spheres of human reality” (p 2) – not one Moebius strip. The details of how each of the authors he examines does this I cannot enter into here – although I can urge anyone interested in psychosocial work to check out what is a thorough, scholarly and impressive achievement. In his conclusion, he suggests that his examination of the four authors produces four psychosocial principles that apply to all of them. I shall comment briefly on those principles because it is there, for me, where the real issue lies. "First Principle: Some sociological questions require psychological answers. (p 260)"

Cavalletto means here that in analyzing “social structure and the individual, culture and the person, social behavior and psychic motivation ... consideration of the one benefits from consideration of the other” (*ibid.*). Expressed more strongly, some things cannot be made sense of without both dimensions: you cannot understand investment in fear of crime discourse (the social level) without attention to an individual's propensity to anxiety (the biographical level); you cannot understand the “power and control” implicated in domestic violence (the social level) without attending to the feelings of vulnerability/anxiety of individual men (the biographical level) – to use but two examples from work with which I have been involved. "Second Principle: The psyche dynamically alters that which society imposes upon it. (p 262)"

Against the sociological assumption that “society's cultural representations are reproduced in a fairly straightforward fashion in the psyches of a population” (*ibid.*), these four authors insist “that the psyche responds to societal pressures – whether these be cultural, economic or political – in distinctly psychodynamic ways” (*ibid.*). The example used from Adorno on the rise of fascism – “the psychodynamic response to the rationalization of society is the de-rationalization of the psyche” (*ibid.*) – could not be more different from the complementary logic (of psychoanalysis and capitalism) proposed by Parker that we saw earlier. Rather more dramatic and bizarre examples of such distinctly psychodynamic responses can be found in the behavior of serial killers, for example, whose behavior is never culturally sanctioned, whatever the peculiarities of their upbringing. In other words, if we do not attend to the psychic responses of serial killers to their various societal pressures, we will never understand their behavior. "Third Principle: The psyche mediates the human interaction that constitutes the social world. (p 263)"

Here, things get more complicated. What Cavalletto means is: “the social not only has a determinate effect on the psyche, but the psyche in turn has such an effect on the social” (p 264). Having said this, he goes on to wonder if this is true of all the authors he has considered. Freud and Adorno arguably might be said to grant “ontological priority to the social domain in its relation to the psyche” (*ibid.*) – a conclusion regarding Freud that might

surprise some. However, as with much in Freud, there is not a single line. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, the opposite position can be found in Freud's "account of the way that the 'personality' of a great leader becomes embodied within the social psychism as 'the cultural superego' of an epoch or civilization" (*ibid.*). Here is where I begin to have problems: can concepts like the superego, developed as individual-level concepts, also do service, unchanged, at the societal/cultural level? That gives me pause. It also connects with the fourth principle, the one where my problems with the third principle become properly theoretically focused. "Fourth Principle: A reciprocal alignment of sociological and psychological analyses requires that they occur at similar levels of abstraction. (p 265)"

What this means is that social factors and psychological conceptualizations are both rendered in relation "to a population group of similarly situated individuals" (*ibid.*). Thus, "[w]hen particular individuals appear as objects of analysis, they usually serve as exemplars of social group characteristics, often in the form of ideal-type constructs that facilitate the larger analysis" (*ibid.*). The implications of this are neatly summarized in Cavalletto's presentation of the work of Jeffrey Prager, a sociologist and psychoanalyst, who found difficulty linking both roles since sociology deals with "impersonal ... social forces" and psychoanalysis with "individual uniqueness and idiosyncrasy" (pp 265–266). In a footnote, Cavalletto suggests that this may also be the problem bedeviling my work: "Jefferson's attempt [in **Jefferson, 2002**] at finding connections between psychosocial variations in fear of crime and neighborhood location is frustrated by an approach that focuses psychological inquiry on the unique psychobiographies of individuals rather than on more broadly conceptualized psychological processes" (p 266, n. 21). Although I would not regard our inquiries as having been about unique psychobiographies, but rather as being a *theoretical* exploration of the role of anxiety in fear of crime, the point about levels remains. If Cavalletto is right in suggesting that one can only link (and think) like with like, such as social groups and *common* psychic factors (e.g. the Authoritarian Personality), I have the same problem as I have with the third principle, namely, can the same notions operate at two different levels? If so, precisely how? I do not have the answers (yet!). But, this seems to me to be the real psychosocial problem – how to connect the individual and society, biography and history, the person and culture – as it has been all along (although "discarded" for a while), not the image we may happen to use to capture this.¹

Conclusion

Given the sustained nature of the attack on Kleinian-influenced psychosocial studies, much is at stake for Frosh and Baraitser in all this. On this, at least, we can agree. My own, equally strongly held, view, which I hope I have made clear, is that *as a direction for psychosocial studies*, it is a mistaken one. This is not to suggest that Lacanian analysis cannot deliver generative insights where the object of attention is the realm of the symbolic, as many current cultural studies attest and much as Foucaultian analysis has done throughout the social sciences. But, if the object of attention is the relation between the psyche and the

social, thinking these in terms of an “in-here” and “out-there”, and of *the points of disjunction between the two*, is an important starting point, whatever theoretical tools are then drawn on to make sense of it all.

Notes

¹ In a strict sense, this “reciprocal alignment” runs through all the principles, according to Cavalletto, but I have no space here to engage with this argument. For present purposes, however, it is unnecessary to resolve the issues this poses for me because it does not alter the thrust of my present argument.

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Tony Jefferson was a Visiting Presidential Scholar at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York. He has researched and published widely on questions to do with youth subcultures, the media, policing, race and crime, masculinity, fear of crime and, most recently, racial violence. His published works include: *Psychosocial Criminology*, 2007 (with Dave Gadd); *Doing Qualitative Research Differently*, 2000 (with Wendy Hollway); *Masculinities, Social Relations and Crime*, 1996 (Special issue of the *British Journal of Criminology*, co-edited with Pat Carlen); *The Case Against Paramilitary Policing*, 1990; *Interpreting Policework*, 1987 and *Controlling the Constable*, 1984 (both with Roger Grimshaw); *Policing the Crisis*, 1978 (with Stuart Hall *et al.*); and *Resistance through Rituals*, 1976/2006 (edited with Stuart Hall). He was the British Editor for the international journal *Theoretical Criminology*.

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