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Psychosocial welfare: reflections on an emerging field

Paul Stenner and David Taylor

Abstract

This paper argues that shifting regimes of welfare provision are accompanied by shifting disciplinary practices. Concern with the psychological dimension has always been present in welfare practices but has typically played a subordinate role in political constructions of policy. We raise the idea that we have entered an epoch in which the ‘psycho’ resonates as surely as the ‘social’ alongside ‘welfare’. We challenge the popular psychologisation of well-being which can result, arguing instead that welfare and wellbeing need to be rethought together and that one implication of this is the need to rethink the knowledge practices of the social and psychological disciplines in relation to changing configurations of welfare.

Key words: agency, emotions, inter-disciplinarity, transdisciplinarity, wellbeing

Introduction

During the phase of the “classic welfare state” provisions for the wellbeing of the needy were envisaged as part of a state coordinated project of *social* welfare. This particular configuration of welfare was, of course, an ongoing construction relative to a particular historical and geographical moment. Lynn Froggett (2002), for example, refers to social democratic welfarism as “old welfare” and traces its mutations through the market led private provisions of the Thatcher era and into the “mixed economy of welfare” of Blair’s regime. Likewise, welfare had different connotations and a different social and psychological reality prior to about 1880, at which point it would have been proximally associated, not with the concept of ‘the social’, but with notions of providence, paternalism and philanthropy (Finlayson, 1994). Welfare is also rapidly acquiring a

different form in the present of our own societies, and will change again in the future. A 'state' is always a snapshot or freeze-frame of a *process*. The same applies to systems of knowledge. Scientific disciplines, for example, are part of society and they too mutate and transform in dialectic with broader social changes, and according to their own internal dynamics. In the following we wish to raise the idea that we have entered an epoch in which the 'psycho' resonates as surely as the 'social' alongside the idea of 'welfare', and that one implication of this is the need to rethink the knowledge practices of the social and psychological disciplines in relation to changing configurations of welfare. Such an approach would yield a politics which attends to the subjective and emotional experiences of welfare users and providers alongside issues of redistribution and social justice.

The psychosocial settlement in 'classic' welfarism

We have suggested that in the epoch of the classic welfare state the notion of welfare was (and to a large extent still is) tightly bound up with the concept of the *social*. This is reflected in the rather firm association between the terms 'social' and 'welfare'. Very few, by contrast, would associate the word 'welfare' with the word 'psycho', which term no doubt leads people into very different and disturbing trains of thought. In short, welfare was understood as a state responsibility and was thoroughly social in so far as it proximally concerned the social arrangements (institutions and offices, legal structures, practices of governance, techniques of knowledge and monitoring, and so on) put in place in the context of a particular type of society often defined as a 'welfare state'.

In this context the *study* of such social welfare arrangements has for the most part been the job of the 'social sciences' such as sociology and, in the UK at least, social policy and social administration. These sciences are themselves part of the knowledge production and transmission systems in this kind of society. Such sciences were both constituted by and constitutive of these welfare arrangements and in this sense both aspects are inseparable parts of a broader social unity (whatever internal contradictions that unity might hold). According to Wallerstein et al (1996: 19), for example, sociology as a

discipline developed “principally out of the institutionalization and transformation within the universities of the work of social reform associations, whose agenda had been primarily that of dealing with the discontents and disorders of the much-enlarged urban working-class populations”.

Despite its ancient roots, the discipline of psychology, like its social scientific siblings, is also a late nineteenth century product. It acquired its place as a science in the academy first in Germany and only shortly afterwards in the UK and US¹. If we adopt the standard line of taking the inauguration of Wundt’s laboratory of 1879 as a start point, then scientific psychology was born about three years before Bismarck first proposed his famous welfare reforms. Unlike the social sciences, however, the primary disciplinary reference points for scientific psychology were medicine and biology (and also physics in the German case), rather than the social arena. Its legitimacy increasingly depended upon its claims to be a *natural* science (or, as with psychoanalysis, a branch of medicine) rather than a social science or, as they were also called in Germany, *Staatwissenschaften* (‘sciences of the state’). This circumstance led many to the conclusion that the only scientifically legitimate psychology is a psychology grounded firmly in bio-chemistry and able to thus move ‘beyond’ social science by specifying universal causal processes that operate at the level of the individual organism. Psychology thus concerned itself for the most part with normal and abnormal ‘mental’ health (and later with normal and pathological ‘behaviour’). In this respect, psychology has not been explicitly concerned with *welfare* as a social project, but with the *wellbeing* of the hypothetically asocial individual. One implication of this settlement is that in addressing its problematic psychology has tended – with minoritarian exceptions - to consider psychological and behavioural processes *in abstraction* from their social context. In their manifestations as specialist knowledge, then, the social and the psychic have been ‘thought separately’².

¹ Other starting points are equally relevant to our theme – see for example Rose, 1985, who prefers a earlier French beginning, and Stenner, 2004, who posits an even earlier English inauguration.

² Social psychology, which one might think should straddle the divide between sociology and psychology, has actually tended to specialise either into a variant of experimental psychology, or a variant of sociology.

Classic 'social' welfare has nevertheless always included a 'psychological' dimension. Psychotherapy, for example, was a key tool in the repertoire of post-war welfare professionals, who have long-since considered themselves as being involved in 'helping' or 'caring' relationships with welfare recipients (Froggett, 2002; Cooper and Lousada, 2005). More generally, issues of social welfare are tightly connected with issues of the personal wellbeing of citizens. Paralleling the emergence of state welfare systems sociology, social policy and social administration have predominantly understood *social welfare* as the provision of *goods and services* (including 'psychological' services) to meet human need, the latter typically being defined in terms of participation in the relations of production, distribution and exchange. In this sense *welfare* is 'well-*doing*' - 'faring' or 'doing well'. It is aimed at securing the social conditions of participation for subjects/citizens, and of course the regulation and limitations of participation for the socially excluded. In many ways, this is captured in Marshall's notion of social citizenship.

Social citizenship tends to be based upon a notion of inclusion which requires the ability to participate publicly on the part of the citizen. This participations is seen as purposive action under the sway of rationality. It is instrumental in that it is individual action directed towards securing social outcomes. If 'welfare' proximally denotes those 'provisions' a society puts in place to guarantee a minimum level of 'life quality' or 'well-being' on the part of its citizens, then this points to a clear relationship between social *welfare* and the *wellbeing* of citizens. This relationship between welfare and wellbeing applies more generally to the way in which the modern nation state came to legitimate itself by way of the wellbeing and happiness of its citizens rather than through the will of God or the dictate of a sovereign³ (on a juridico-political level, a minimum level of wellbeing is construed in terms of the basic 'rights' that citizens have by virtue of their membership of such societies). The minimum level of well-being aimed at in the

³ Consider Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, for instance, in which it is stated that "Governments are instituted among Men" to secure the rights of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness", and that governments thus derive their "just powers from the consent of the governed". This basic principle of the modern nation state is more or less repeated in the French Declaration.

classic welfare configurations is supposed to ensure the *inclusion* into society and regulation and administration of a vast swathe of disadvantaged people who might otherwise risk *de facto* exclusion.

The social provisions of welfare in the classic epoch thus aimed at securing the *viability of the social order through the regulation of the wellbeing of welfare subjects* and, reciprocally, *the individual wellbeing of its subjects is regulated through the social order*. There is thus a clear sense in which the ‘psychological’ dimension has long been an integral part of the configuration of social welfare, although this sense is not adequately captured by disciplinary or ‘state’ psychology (which, for the most part, concentrates upon the structure and functioning of an ‘ideal’ self-contained abstract cognitive system or behaving organism) or by sociology and the social sciences. At a deep level, the social and psychological sciences thus face a grounding paradox. They came into being as a result of this *relation* between ‘society’ and ‘subject’, but in functionally specializing each on just one side of this relation, they served to obscure the very relation that called them into being. The disciplines think the psychic and the social in separation, when in practical reality they are inseparable aspects of the same process.

One implication of this situation has been a tendency on the part of practitioners and commentators alike to oscillate between a focus upon the social system (a ‘norm-centred’ orientation) and a focus upon the person, their experiences and their relationships (a ‘human-centred’ orientation). This tension – which compounds the distinction between the sociological and the psychological - dates back a long way (Stenner, 2004). Thomas Hobbes, for example, exemplifies a norm-centred orientation that emphasizes the rules of the *Leviathan*, whilst Jean-Jacques Rousseau exemplifies a ‘human-centred’ orientation sensitive to the suffering of concrete human beings. When Bismarck, the right wing and ruthlessly anti-socialist chancellor of the Reichstag, proposed to introduce the world’s first welfare state in 1881, he was concerned less with the well-being of the average German worker *as such* than with preventing the revolutionary radicalization of labourers dwelling in vast and insanitary urban slums. It was, in other words, the stability of the social system that he had proximally in mind when he introduced national health,

accident insurance and pension provisions as *Grundrechte* or basic rights. But, despite this norm-centred orientation, he nevertheless proposed these welfare interventions into the wellbeing of ‘borderline’ citizens. Not dissimilar stories are routinely told concerning the motives for the comparable initiatives of Lloyd George in the U.K. and Roosevelt in the U.S. In less cynical contexts, the rationale for welfare provisions appears superficially to be less social-system-oriented and more ‘human-centred’, stressing the need to address inequalities which are harmful to disadvantaged cohorts of citizens. To the extent that social systems are put in place to manage such suffering, however, a norm-centered orientation will typically be at play in administering the services. Indeed, the code ‘equality / inequality’ assumes an orientation to a social system rather than an individual human being.

Classic ‘social’ welfare, in sum, has always included a ‘psychological’ dimension, just as the dimension of ‘wellbeing’, in the modern epoch, has always been a profoundly social concern. These relations, however, have been veiled by the *disciplining* of welfare into the social sciences and by the disciplining of wellbeing into bio-psychological sciences.

The social salience of the *psychological* in post-classic regimes of welfare

Many commentators have tried to document and explain a recent change in the configuration of welfare and social governance more broadly. Most agree that the “Beveridge era” period of the classic welfare state ended in the 1970s in a context in which “economy and society have changed and so too has the field of social policy” (Cahill, 1994, 1). Markers of such change include a tendency towards the marketization and hence consumerization of public service provision; the growth of managerialism as a prevalent ethos; the privatization of individual needs and desires (e.g. with respect to issues like transport and consumption); the development of Information Technology and its impact upon the possibilities of communication and entertainment, and so on. Others have stressed the importance of “neo-liberal” technologies of governance to the current societal configuration (e.g. Finlayson, 1994, Rose, 1989, Clarke, 1998, Newman 2001). In large part, this relates to the increasing encroachment of economic forms of rationality

and governance into social sectors dealing with health, social work, education, and so on (Fawcett and Featherstone, 1998). Still others have identified the shift with more general (and hence more contentious) notions such as a move into “postmodernity” (Carter, 1998), or variants such as “late modernity”, “reflexive modernity” or “the risk society”.

Some of the issues at stake in these narratives of welfare transition concern genuine novelties which have introduced new dynamics into social processes, such as the IT revolution associated with the development of digital technology (Loader, 1998). Other processes are better conceived as intensifications and extensions of tendencies with far longer histories, such as spread of economic rationality or the proliferation of a discourse of human rights. What is striking from our perspective, however, is the extent of agreement in the literature over the proposition that these changes represent an amplification of the social relevance of what can loosely be called the ‘psychological’ dimension.

The social salience of the psychological is enhanced, for instance, by the shift from the public to the private. The ‘public’ spaces of transport, housing, pension, employment, mass media and so on have gradually given way to ‘private’ concerns such as car and home ownership, private pension schemes, self-employment and ‘commercial’ channels. As this privatising process unfolds, so ‘psychological’ issues of choice, preference and self-reference (self-interest, self-expression, self-management, etc.) come increasingly to take over the territory of ‘social’ issues of collective debate, decision and action.

The social salience of the psychological is also directly at issue in what Beck (1992) calls *individualization processes*, what Foucaultians call techniques of *subjectification* (Rose, 1989) and what Giddens calls the ‘reflexivity’ of the self (Giddens, 1992). In such accounts, reliance upon externally imposed social norms and structures (issues that might easily be classed as ‘social’) is seen to be, generally speaking, gradually eroded and replaced with reliance upon self-chosen life-style choices. To use Nik Rose’s evocative phrase, in the new regimes of governance we are ‘obliged to be free’ (Rose, 1989). Further, according to many commentators, the social salience of the psychological is also

magnified in the outputs of the mass media. Reality TV, talkshows and Hollywood movies revel in the intimate details of personal lives and amplify the cultural relevance of individual passions, conflictual emotions and the subtleties of feeling.

As Nettleton and Burrows (1998: 156) argue with respect to Britain, relatively recent (they talk of the late 1970s onwards) changes in the configuration and practice of welfare have made a decisive contribution to these issues of self reflexivity, subjectification or individualization. They illustrate this by way of an examination of housing and health policy, but comparable arguments could be made with respect to education, social care, transport and environmental policies. Namely, in each domain one finds:

- a) the re-making of welfare recipients as clients or “consumers” who are required (or “empowered”) to make *choices*;
- b) the proliferation and extensive adoption of technologies of “informatization” such as needs assessment (for health, housing and social care), league tables (for schools, hospitals, local authority housing repair waiting times, and the RAE in universities) and myriad other audit reports”;
- c) an orientation towards “prevention” rather than provision of goods and services to those in need.

It seems clear that the current configuration of welfare cannot be adequately conceptualised without recognising this new *social* salience that accrues to the psychological dimension. In this sense, it could be said that a ‘psychosocial’ approach to welfare is inevitable to the extent that ‘social’ welfare has itself been thoroughly psychologised, individualised and, in the new jargon, ‘personalised’ and ‘responsibilised’. The more the ‘weight’ of welfare provision becomes a matter of individual responsibility, choice and desire, the more prominent and unavoidable the psychological dimension becomes.

Meanwhile, at the level of knowledge practices, the discipline and craft of psychology has itself shifted from being a minoritarian interest with dubious credentials to being

amongst the most popular choice of subject for school leavers and for undergraduate students both in the UK and the US. Self-help psychology texts are now a practically constant feature on the international best-sellers list and applied psychologists have busied themselves in an enormous number of domains beyond the psychotherapeutic. Psychology has effectively attached itself to every significant societal sub-sector and hence given rise to specialisms such as educational psychology, forensic psychology, occupational psychology, economic psychology, clinical psychology, counselling psychology, health psychology, sport psychology, and so on. Where there is a choice to be made or a constraint to be removed, a subjectivity to be publicly self-managed, there is a psychologist to advise - and this applies no less to the virtual realm of talk shows and Hollywood movies than to what used to be referred to as 'reality'. In Giddens' words, the reflexive self is an ongoing project "carried on amid a profusion of reflexive resources: therapy and self help manuals of all kinds, television programmes and magazine articles" (1992: 30).

As psychology has proliferated, however, psychologists have also grown increasingly aware of the limitations of a narrow focus upon psychological functioning in abstraction from social context. From the 1970s onwards, for example, there has emerged an increasingly vocal movement of 'critical psychology'. Critical psychologists have discredited the positivistic epistemology that had legitimated claims to natural science status and have challenged the assumption of a self-contained psychological unit, stressing the socially occasioned nature of psychological processes as well as the ideological nature of psychological knowledge (Curt, 1994).

At the same time, amongst the full range of social sciences there has been a conspicuous (if not exclusive) turn, first to micro-interactional discursive processes (the linguistic, textual or discursive turn), and then to a concern with affect and the emotions (Greco and Stenner, *in press*). Furthermore, the work of some of the most prominent contemporary sociologists such as Giddens, Rose, Beck and Honneth (themselves under the influence of Elias, Foucault, Luhmann and Habermas respectively) has itself become increasingly

concerned with the psychological dimension. It is in this shifting disciplinary context that a new 'psychosocial' approach to the study of welfare is beginning to take form.

Psychosocial Welfare

We have sketched a background against which a psychosocial approach to welfare appears both inevitable and necessary. A viable approach to welfare cannot be content with descriptions of welfare systems and constructions of human need and subjectivity based solely in singular disciplines employing stand-alone disciplinary conceptions of the social and the psychological. The challenge is to invent new ways of thinking the social and the psychological *together* rather than separately and hence to recognize the extent to which they are distinct aspects or expressions of a unified process. There is a need to inoculate ourselves from the tendency to treat the psychological and the social in abstraction from each other. Social practices and policies always have psychological relevance and implications, and are likewise always expressions of particular forms of experience. At the same time we must recognize what might be distinctive about the psychic and the social in order to resist the tendency to explain everything from one vantage point or the other. A psychological orientation may simply not be equipped to address the issues of redistribution, equality and inequality, justice and injustice that pertain to societal level structures and processes, for example.

At the same time, any emergent psychosocial approach must also be *critical* if we are to avoid simply affirming the psychological dimension, particularly in the decontextualised form that the discipline of psychology presents it. Likewise with respect to sociology, the concepts of 'reflexivity' and 'choice' are highly contentious in the lives of many of those with limited resources (Adams, 2007). To construe citizens as free and rational agents, in this context, is to deny the structural realities that constrain 'choice', and to re-package them as failings of rationality predicated upon flawed risk assessments. The phrases 'choice of school' and 'choice of hospital' are all very well for those also able to purchase a dedicated psychoanalyst, private health insurance, gym instructor, financial adviser, lawyer, mathematics tutor and dietician, but ring hollow in the ears of those who genuinely risk exclusion from the social system through poverty and marginalization. In

this sense, these individualising techniques specialise in re-inscribing social failure onto the bodies and psyches of individuals. A psychosocial approach to welfare must, above all, break free of the current settlement between the disciplines of psychology and of sociology and reject political notions that the well-being can be achieved by rational consumerism. It is thus also becoming increasingly necessary to invent ways of scrutinising the social and psychological sciences as practices which are very much enmeshed within the events and power relations of a socio-historical epoch.

To this end it is relevant to draw attention to the fact that a growing number of academics and practitioners are coming to adopt a 'psychosocial' approach to welfare issues that explicitly strives to think the psychological and the social together (see, for example, Howe, 1997; Hoggett, 2001; Froggett, 2002; Cooper and Lousada, 2005; Taylor, 2006). Viewed from an institutional perspective, for instance, recent years have witnessed a marked proliferation of research groupings and centres operating under the more general label of *Psychosocial Studies*, particularly in the UK. Many of these take welfare issues, broadly understood, as a central topic of concern. The University of East Anglia, for example, offers an undergraduate degree in Psychosocial Studies based in the School of Social Work and Psychosocial Studies. Likewise, a degree in Psychosocial Studies launched by the University of East London in 1983 is advertised as providing a strong basis for work in social welfare. According its co-founder Barry Richards, this programme came into being through demand from social science students interested in working in the social welfare field: "They needed a knowledge base to enable them to locate welfare interventions in broad social and historical forces, and also tools with which to think about interpersonal relationships, and how individuals come to experience the world in different ways" (Richards 2000). There are now also prominent teaching and research groupings at the Universities of Brighton, the West of England, Central Lancashire, Cardiff, The Open University and Birkbeck College, most of which have strong connections with welfare issues.

Parallel to these developments we find a growing number of governmental, non-governmental and voluntary organizations defining themselves in relation to the notion of

the 'psychosocial'. They tend to be concerned with managing crisis situations following wars and natural or humanitarian disasters (such as flooding, migration, dislocation, epidemics, crimes against humanity). These aim at reconciliation or reconstruction at the individual *and* social level, and the two levels are treated as inseparable. Examples here would include the work of Aid Charities like the Red Cross or international governance organizations such as the UN or UNICEF in post-conflict reconciliation which describe their work as psychosocial interventions directed towards traumatized *individuals, groups* or *societies* (e.g. the UNICEF psychosocial trauma recovery programme in Rwanda in the 1990s or psychosocial programmes to rehabilitate child victims of trauma in Kosovar). Advocates of such programmes often describe them as forms 'therapeutic governance'.

The label 'psychosocial' suggests that this work is concentrated at the interface of the bio-psychological sciences and the social sciences and, as such, it constitutes a re-working of territory traditionally allocated to social psychology. Such groups, however, typically operate outside of Departments of Psychology (and often, as we have just described, outside of universities). They are involved in *applied* research often with a normative agenda of justice and equality; they stress the inseparability of personal and social being; they attend to the cultural and political embeddedness of "knowledge"; and they tend to share a rather reflexive – if not downright critical - relationship to the positivistic epistemology and experimental methodology of conventional social psychology (Frosh, 2003).

In this latter context it is relevant to briefly mention another related and no less applied strand of 'psychosocial studies' which tends to be less critical of the natural science model (although often still thoroughly engaged in the articulation of a successor 'paradigm') and more associated with health and wellbeing than with welfare and social justice. This psychosocial aspects of health conditions approach tends, of course, to be located in schools and faculties of health and medicine rather than social science and humanities. This strand includes almost any domain of practice or medical specialism understood in its psychological or social context, such as psychosocial oncology, psychosocial physiology, psychosocial chronic disease management and so on. The

models deployed tend to stay with a baseline bio-medical model but then extrapolate out to the social and psychological ‘factors’ which influence health.

A related but more sociologically oriented approach to the psychosocial aspects of health and well-being is that which seeks out ‘psychosocial factors’ or, as in the case of Richard Wilkinson’s work (Wilkinson, 1998) ‘psychosocial pathways’ to health and illness.

Taking these related developments together, it seems that the time is ripe to take stock of what a ‘psychosocial’ approach might entail and what kinds of challenges it poses and may itself face. We use this remainder of this paper to reflect a little on what it might mean to take a ‘psychosocial’ approach to issues of welfare or to address the ‘psychosocial dimensions’ of welfare.

Problems of knowledge: the double focus of second order observation

There is a good deal of diversity at play both within and between groupings who identify themselves as in some way ‘psychosocial’. We are not dealing with a singular ‘voice’ but with a veritable choir and all are not singing from the same disciplinary hymn sheet. The genealogy of psychosocial studies, for instance, includes influences from a number of traditions. At the very least, these include classical sociology and social psychology; Eriksonian ego-identity theory; the hybrids of psychoanalysis and sociology proposed by the Frankfurt School and figures such as Erich Fromm; systems theory inspired bio-psycho-social models and accounts of communicational pragmatics; social constructionist and post-structuralist accounts of subjectivity; current versions of attachment theory; feminist theory; queer theory; post-colonial theory; cultural studies and critical and discursive psychology.

One of the propositions we wish to advance here is that this multiplicity may well be a virtue rather than a vice. Indeed, we may do well to resist the temptation to attempt to unify this diversity under a singular theoretical scheme or normative agenda and to carve out a new disciplinary specialism which takes ‘psychosocial factors’ as its proper subject matter. It may well be, to put it differently, that it is precisely the freedom from

disciplinarity that makes psychosocial studies potentially interesting and productive. It may well be that the solution of disciplinarity has itself become a source of problems and hence that disciplinarity itself must explicitly take its place amongst the *subject matter* of psychosocial studies. Psychosocial studies would thus be conceivable as a *transdiscipline*.

This proposition need not mean that we abandon or de-value discipline-based practice, nor that ‘anything goes’. On the contrary, it requires considerable rigour and creativity to move in the interstitial spaces between disciplines and to invent new points of access to important issues. It does, however, call for some sustained thinking about disciplinarity itself. Such thinking is already present in most of the influences we rapidly listed above. Systems theory, communication theory and structuralism, for instance, were explicit attempts to generate new bases for scientific theory and practice that were to provide general concepts able to transcend specific disciplinary boundaries (including the line drawn in the sand between the natural and the social sciences). These traditions thus resulted in transformed thinking and practice across a whole gamut of natural and social science disciplines. Post-structuralism and social constructionism responded to perceived failures in this adventure, pointing to the insurmountability of contingency, insisting – more often than not - on the primacy of discourse, and adding the broadly ‘Foucaultian’ meaning of *discipline* to a critique of disciplinarity. Again, these broad traditions affected transformations in a wide range of disciplines, particularly in the social sciences and humanities.

It is not surprising, then, that reflection on disciplinarity is also present - at least in an implicit sense - in the work of several of those who have already proposed a ‘psychosocial’ approach. David Howe’s article “Psychosocial and relationship based-theories for child and family social work” (Howe, 1997) is a good example here. In part it advances the now familiar argument that the human self is an “essentially social entity”: (161) and hence that attention to the dense complexities of social and personal relationships and emotional connectedness is fundamental to any viable welfare practice. This move echoes broader debates about the ‘theory of the subject’ in which the

assumption of a modern self-contained, rational decision-making subject is challenged by an account of a fragmented and contradictory subject positioned in multiple discourses (Henriques et al, 1998). However, Howe's paper also meditates upon and criticizes disciplinarity in that it illustrates how prevailing political climate shapes the dominant forms of knowledge production, dissemination and application, often to the detriment of such sensitivity to the social complexities and 'irrationalities' of psychological life.

Likewise, Stephen Frosh's article "Psychosocial studies and psychology: is a critical approach emerging" (Frosh, 2003) advances several "foundational assumptions" of psychosocial studies including, of course, "concern for the human subject as a social entity" and the emergence of subjectivity "in the social domain" (8). However, Frosh not only presents "methodological and theoretical pluralism" as additional foundational assumptions, but also offers an explicit reflection on disciplinarity that brings it close to the tradition of *critical* psychology (see Henriques et al, 1998, Curt, 1994) – itself influenced by French poststructuralism. This is reflected in the foundational assumption "interest in critique, defined as concern with ideological issues in psychology" and also in the idea that psychosocial studies must examine "the conditions for knowledge out of which disciplinary power arises" (6).

Howe and Frosh, in short, are not just observers of human beings in relational context, but also observers of the forms of knowledge which take these phenomena as its subject matter in order to inform welfare practice. Borrowing a term from Heinz von Foerster (1979) we might call what they are doing, 'second order observation'. This reflexive 'double focus' is not just about adopting a critical approach concerned with the re-evaluation of the existing disciplinary forms of the social and psychological sciences (and hence a thoroughgoing reconsideration of the basic concepts of social and psychological sciences). It is also predicated upon the recognition that the social and psychological sciences are deeply implicated in social regulation and governance and can not lay claim to an external and neutral observer position. They are part of the broader social order that gave rise to them and to which they helped give rise.

However, these sciences are not only part of and implicated in *society* since, as a result of this, they also play a shaping role in our *psychic* existence (Rose, 1989). They provide us (whether ‘expert’ or ‘lay’) with authoritative (because ostensibly scientific) ‘texts of identity’ (Shotter and Gergen, 1989) or narratives of selfhood. In reflexively scrutinising the disciplines, in other words, a psychosocial approach must attend both to what we might call *the social life of psychological and sociological knowledge*, and to *the psychic life* of such knowledge (Stenner 2007).

Problems of knowledge: multidisciplinary, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity

To push this reflection on disciplinarity a little further, we will briefly distinguish two disciplinary modes of practice - multi and inter-disciplinarity - and contrast these with what we wish to call a *transdisciplinary* approach to the psychosocial (Nicolescu, 2002, Stenner, 2005). These distinctions are fuzzy in nature and some overlap is, thankfully, always evident, but they might nevertheless help us to unsnarl the knot of existing psychosocial studies and to better discriminate any distinct ‘dialects’.

As we have just discussed, various distinguishable intellectual trajectories have fed into the contemporary mix of psychosocial studies, and each is, to some extent, ‘transdisciplinary’ in the sense of attempting to ‘go beyond’ and ‘transform’ existing disciplinary formations. However, some are perhaps better characterized as ‘multidisciplinary’ or ‘interdisciplinary’ rather than ‘transdisciplinary’.

Multidisciplinarity involves tackling a problem in a coordinated fashion from various discipline-based vantage points. These disciplines might be ‘academic’ (in which case they are likely to be called ‘sciences’) or thoroughly ‘practice based’ (in which case they may be called ‘professions’ and the approach ‘multi-professional’). Drug addiction, for instance, can potentially be studied from the vantage point of chemistry (since a drug is a chemical compound), physiology (since the drug enters and alters the operations of the organic body), psychology (since the drug might alter mental functioning and behaviour),

criminology (since drugs can be illegal), economics (since drugs are bought and sold), sociology (since drug use varies according to position in the social structure), history and anthropology (since drug use varies historically and culturally), social policy (since drugs are the subject of policy interventions), and so on. Likewise, in relation to the disciplines *qua* professions, drug addiction might at different points become the concern of pharmacists (who might make them), medics (who might treat their physical effects), therapists (who might treat their mental and behavioural effects), police (who attempt to control drug use and distribution), social workers (who may assess the needs of drug users), etc.

In multidisciplinary scientific collaboration, each discipline concentrates upon its own proper domain of *abstraction* (chemicals, biological processes, behavioural patterns, money, and so on) enabling the assembly and coordination of numerous abstractions which together (hopefully) enrich the picture we have of the problem. Each discipline need not *change* as a result of its contribution in multidisciplinary research, but there is of course the chance that it *might*. It seems to us that the body of psychosocial activity identified earlier that is concerned with managing crisis situations following wars and natural or humanitarian disasters tends to operate in this multidisciplinary way. This work tends to involve coordinating the contributions of, for example, medics, psychotherapists and other players to the very practical end of crisis management. Likewise, the psychosocial aspects of health conditions approach often operates in multidisciplinary mode, combining data and knowledge from psychologists and sociologists with that of physiologists, for example. Multi-professional health and social care community-based teams may work in this way, where underlying discrete professional practices remain in tact.

Interdisciplinarity, by contrast, concerns the transfer of concepts and methods from one discipline to another in order to solve problems (Nicolescu, 2002: 43). Sometimes this interdisciplinary process can yield new disciplines as when the transfer of imaging technologies to psychology yields cognitive neuroscience. One clear dialect of psychosocial studies, for instance, sometimes calls itself ‘psychoanalytical sociology’

(Clarke, 2006) and is an instance of a long interdisciplinary tradition of applying psychoanalytical concepts such as narcissism, splitting, repression, and projective identification to social phenomena such as systems of interaction and even welfare systems (see, Cooper and Lousada, 2005 and Froggett, 2002).

Transdisciplinarity is harder to define (Mittelstras, 1991, Curt, 1994, Gibbons et al, 1994, Thompson Klein et al, 2001, Nicolescu, 2002). In 1994, for instance, at least three different versions were offered in the form of Basarab Nicolescu's Charter of Transdisciplinarity (announced at the First World Congress of Transdisciplinarity in Portugal), Gibbons et al's book: *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies*, and Beryl Curt's *Textuality and Tectonics: Troubling social and psychological science*. Each presents a version of transdisciplinarity concerned with the space between, across and beyond existing disciplines, but each account emphasizes different aspects of the notion.

For example, Gibbons et al have a somewhat utilitarian or pragmatic conception of transdisciplinarity. The emphasis is placed on the practicality and social utility of a transformed relationship between science and society. In this new relationship, knowledge is generated in its domain of application rather than first arrived at in the pure space of the laboratory. As a result, transdisciplinary knowledge is inherently problem oriented, and, as a final distinctive feature, includes the multiple perspectives of different stakeholders (Gibbons et al, 1994).

In Nicolescu's account, by contrast, the tone is less pragmatic and more theoretical (at times an aim at salvation through knowledge). Transdisciplinarity is our only hope if we are to survive the self-destructive dangers of modern, utility oriented technoscience. It is about coming to terms with different levels of reality, with logics of 'thirdness' and with complexity, and it is concerned with "the dynamics engendered by the action of several levels of reality at once" (2002: 45). This is an account grounded in the natural sciences, and draws its inspiration from quantum theory, chaos theory and complexity theory.

Beryl Curt's account, by contrast, draws its inspiration from postmodern developments in the social sciences and humanities. The emphasis is placed upon issues of power, justice and equality as these pertain to the operations of knowledge in a broader project of social transformation (Curt, 1994). Disciplines tend to produce 'singularised' accounts of reality which marginalize and exclude other realities. Here, the word 'discipline' takes on the Foucaultian connotations of discipline and this transdisciplinarity connotes a resistance of a sort.

Both multi and interdisciplinarity, then, remain *disciplinary* in form since the goals of such research remain discipline-centred, even as they transform and give rise to new disciplines. With *transdisciplinarity* we are dealing in part with that which *escapes* disciplinary knowledge. In other words, if interdisciplinarity were the careful setting up of trade-routes between pre-established disciplines, then transdisciplinarity would be the invention of new spaces of knowledge and practice that transform the existing territory by opening it up to the new. If the former might combine, say, psychological and sociological findings, the latter would address a hybrid psychosocial space that neither psychology nor sociology adequately come to terms with. A transdisciplinary psychosocial studies would deal with the space 'between' and would be inclusive enough to move between the abstractions of different sciences, noting their necessary exclusions, whilst simultaneously taking into account the situated personal knowledge and experience of non-specialists and other forms of subjugated knowledge. The knowledge that results is always a hybrid knowledge that combines features and themes that are not usually assembled on the same epistemological plane.

Psychosocial welfare: the social, the psychological and the hybrid

Such 'hybrid' knowledge may produce new conceptions of its complex subject matter or may involve a reworking and re-interpretation of existing conceptions. We have suggested already that the relationship between conceptions of well-being and welfare

may be one candidate for such a reworking. Well-being, understood from the disciplinary perspectives of traditional psychology and sociology has a strong anchor in rational action directed towards the public realm, increasingly exercised through choice and consumerism. However, we might suggest that if well-being is about '*being well*' it must be understood in a more complex way than through the economically oriented rational actions of reflexive consumers. At the very least we know that health and well-being are directly linked, not simply to individual morbidity and mortality outcomes but to inequality (Wilkinson, 1998) and is essentially relational. Well-being cannot be considered outside of social context and social relations. Likewise, we would argue, that welfare – *doing well* cannot be grasped without an understanding of the subjective and emotional. Participation in social relations has an essentially affective dimension. A psychosocial approach to welfare, then, brings together questions of doing and being, of acting and feeling. It raises questions not just about how subjects participate in formal public social relations, but also about the substantive affectual basis of that participation, i.e. about the wellbeing of welfare subjects. This concern with affect applies equally to formal and informal systems of welfare – from the formal relational basis of professional welfare practices to the informal relations of care.

Some commentators already detect a change in policy emphasis in which economic forms of rationality and the 'psychologisation' of well-being are beginning to be challenged. According to Jordan (2007), for example, 'the well-being agenda reflects the beginning of a shift away from individualization, choice, markets and mobility which have driven the transformation of citizenship and public life in the past 25 years' (p viii). Jordan cites the policy intervention of Richard Layard in the UK as a sign of a 'new approach to public policy which promotes the common good, and ... a shift to a new perspective where people's feelings are paramount' (p vii). It is doubtful whether these approaches will lead to the sort of policy changes which might address both personal well-being and social welfare at the same time but it is true that new intellectual spaces for understanding welfare and wellbeing together are beginning to open up.

In the context of theories of social policy this attention to feelings and emotion is present in a range of work which has focused on *agency* (see, for example, Deacon and Mann, 1999). If agency is a concern with how we come to act in social context historically this has for the most part been understood as rational action, that is, cognitively directed action in the form of a plan. Whilst in sociological work attention has been paid to so-called 'reflexive' agency, in recent work on welfare (e.g. Hoggett, 2001, Ferguson, 2003, Froggett, 2002, Cooper and Lousada, 2005) attention has started to be focused on the 'sensitive ... the passionate, tragic and contradictory dimensions of human experience.' (Hoggett, 2001). This approach is concerned not only with the potential of the welfare subject for rational action but also non-reflexive action, with passivity or with negative agency. 'A robust account of the active welfare subject must be prepared to confront the real experiences of powerlessness and psychic injury which result from injustice and oppression and acknowledge human capacities for destructiveness towards self and others' (Hoggett 2001). For some this involves understanding the changing emotional dynamics of attachment to welfare for service users (Froggett, 2001) and welfare professionals (Cooper and Lousada 2005). Psychosocial approaches to welfare acknowledge this duality and are concerned, as a result, with an exploration of the social life of the psychic world and the psychic life of social forms.

Conclusion

The thinking together of the social and the psychological that psychosocial studies pursues has a particular resonance, we believe, for an applied field such as social policy. The lived experience of welfare requires us to attend to the emotional dimensions of those experiences for users of services and for the welfare professionals who provide them. It requires the critical resources of a range of disciplines which may lead us to multi and inter-disciplinary thinking but, most of all, it may require us to elaborate new transdisciplinary ideas which can come to terms with the inter-penetration of the psychic and the social. Played out in relation to studies of welfare we suggest this may involve a consideration of wellbeing and welfare together so that individual wellbeing cannot be reduced to individualised psychology and that social welfare cannot be reduced to participation in the public sphere without consideration of what has previously been

constructed as the private and the emotional. To achieve this understanding we need to employ a conception of agency which can capture the non-rational and the negative as well as the positive rational public performance of much social policy discourse. It requires a recognition of the interpenetration of the psychic and the social and the need to rethink some key popular and disciplinary constructions of the welfare subject and the scope of social policy.

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