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TITLE PAGE: INTRODUCTION

Researching the psychosocial: An introduction

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This introduction has no abstract or key words or author biographies.

1 Introduction

This special issue explores key issues relevant to psychosocial research and presents innovative qualitative approaches for investigating this emerging field. The term 'psychosocial' is increasingly widely used and has become associated with its own 'turn' in social theorising and research. Such a turn would be consistent with a now-well established trajectory of academic innovation. It implies a Kuhnian leap and a major re-framing through which deficiencies and absences in current theory and research are recognised then remedied, opening up new directions and problems for investigation, as occurred in psychology with the 'discursive turn' of the 1980s and 90s. However, the status of a psychosocial turn is less clear-cut, first because of the very broad reference of the term 'psychosocial', second, because of the apparent overlap with the project of social psychology, and third, because of the odd relation of the psychosocial to psychology more generally, including the rejection of its main traditions of qualitative research. This introduction expands on these points and introduces the five central articles in this special issue, each of which contributes a particular resolution to the challenges of the new turn, and the commentaries in which two senior critical and social psychologists, Ian Parker and Margaret Wetherell, reflect on future directions for psychosocial research.

2 Defining the psychosocial

The term 'psychosocial' has, inevitably, a range of reference and definitions. One end of the range is perhaps represented by a Wikipedia entry which refers to therapeutic interventions ('psycho-educational or psycho-pharmacological') to assist people find 'solutions for individual challenges in interacting with an element of the social environment'. According to

this definition, psychosocial interventions particularly aim to support ‘victims of disaster, catastrophe or violence’ (Psychosocial, Wikipedia, 2014).

A more academically focussed definition with less emphasis on interventions can be found in the website of a cross-university network, based in the UK but embracing an international membership (Psychosocial Studies Network, 2014). It defines the psychosocial as a trans- or interdisciplinary ‘field of inquiry concerned with ‘the tensions between and mutual constitution of the social and the psychic’. Although terminology is inevitably difficult in a new field, ‘psychic’ suggests a link to psychoanalysis and psychodynamic theory; however, the website claims a wider reference, stating that ‘Psychosocial studies draw inspiration from a range of sources including critical theory, post-structuralism, process philosophy, feminism and psychoanalysis, and various ‘dialects’ are in the process of emergence’. The network’s members aim to investigate ‘the social shaping of subjective experience’ and the ‘psychological dimensions’ of ‘social and cultural worlds’ ‘without deterministically reducing the psychic to the social’ or vice versa. It is notable that psychoanalysis is distinguished here from psychology which is not mentioned as a ‘source’, despite the reference to ‘psychological dimensions’. This indicates one of the questions which have prompted this special issue, that is, why many psychosocial researchers draw on psychology theories and concepts, particularly those associated with psychoanalysis, while locating themselves outside the psychology discipline.

For example, another university research group which is concerned with ‘the psychosocial’ similarly refers to ‘the psychological’ but subsumes it within the psychosocial. The group’s website states ‘We see the social and the psychological as both inseparable and individual

forces that produce each other and our research gives equal emphasis to both’ (Psychosocial Research Programme, 2014). The group’s programme of research is specified as follows: ‘We map out the ways in which social, cultural, historical, and material factors help to produce and are part of subjective and psychological phenomena and, conversely, look at how social, cultural and material worlds are made up from phenomena that are, in some measure, subjective and psychological.’

Despite the variations, there some noticeable common features within these definitions of the psychosocial. These include a concern with the relationship between an individual and their environment or context, and the embrace of psychoanalysis as part of academic research, rather than clinical practice. Another feature is the centrality of methodologies which draw on psychoanalytic theory. This is consistent with a recent review of a collection on psychosocial research methods which comments that ‘a niggling thought creeps in; discernible in the way that many of this book’s authors return to the basic premises of psychoanalysis; the thought being whether psychosocial should be re-written as psychoanalytical?’ (Fellenor 2010). Current trends in psychosocial theorising suggest this is already implicitly in place. This special issue will present a wider, more inclusive range of possibilities.

3 The relation to psychology

The definitions of the psychosocial cited above suggest the ambiguous relationship with psychology which has already been noted and, in places, a reductive view of it. For example, the definitions imply that psychology is not concerned with the social, which social psychologists would challenge. Indeed, the double reference of ‘psycho-social’ might seem

to summarise the general project of social psychology, that is, the exploration of the interface or cross-relationship or inextricable connection between the psychological – construed broadly as related to the person – and the social, referring to what is collective, cultural or, even more simply, beyond the lifespan or experience of any particular embodied individual. Yet, the Wikipedia entry specifically contrasts the psychosocial with social psychology, claiming that the latter ‘attempts to explain social patterns within the individual’. Many social psychologists might find this an inadequate account of their work, for example, in discursive or discourse analytic research which resists discussion in terms of the individual (Taylor, this issue).

Locating the psychosocial as outside and separate to psychology has several potential consequences. One is that it tends to discount psychology’s contributions, past and continuing, to some of the ‘objects’ which psychosocial researchers have made a special focus of attention. Examples of these include the body and embodiment, which have long been a concern for phenomenological social psychologists, discussed in this issue by Stanley et al (this issue); affect, discussed in this issue by McAvoy (this issue) and elsewhere by Taylor and Littleton (2012) and Wetherell (2012), and the material world of ‘things’, discussed in this issue by Di Masso and Dixon (this issue) and addressed elsewhere within psychology through work on distributed cognition and Activity Theory (for example, by Engestrom and Middleton, 1998) and linked to cross- and interdisciplinary areas of research such as science and technology studies, and Actor-Network-Theory (Latour 2007).

Another effect of the separation is to exoticise psychology and promote a selective re-claiming or re-discovery of some of its concepts, and theorists, such as William James. This

can lead to distortions. For example, Wetherell (2012) has criticised some of the best-known psychosocial writing on affect by non-psychologists as a 'mash-up'. Wetherell argues that 'the kind of psychology [these writers] draw on is not the only available psychological story' (p.61) and suggests that 'if the standard psychological term 'affect' is co-opted to cover every kind of influence then we are in a definitional morass' (p.75).

A further consequence of particular relevance to this special issue is the apparent rejection of the methodological traditions of psychology. To understand these, it is necessary to acknowledge the special contrast case which exists for psychologists conducting qualitative research. This contrast case is mostly associated with experimental and cognitive psychology. It involves the reduction of 'the social' to a discrete and measurable factor or set of factors acting on an already existing person, and gives rise to the kind of quantitative study which models discrete and measurable inputs and outputs. Qualitative psychology researchers counter the contrast case to a greater or lesser extent in the assumptions and methods of their approaches. For example, qualitative psychology researchers generally reject the positivist premises of the contrast model, including the possibility of knowing in terms of universals which supersede context and allow of prediction and modelling. One counter assumption is that the qualitative researcher cannot be a detached observer but is inevitably an involved interpreter whose viewpoint, experience and life position shapes their findings. Qualitative researchers therefore reject any simple 'truth' status for evidence.

Although qualitative psychology researchers in the main reject the contrast case, its existence probably contributes to the special value attached to empirical research within psychology, including qualitative research. Claims are made for the representativeness and

generalisability of research and, as a corollary, for the importance of planning a research project to maximise these features. They amount to a rejection of arguments that interpretative research cannot logically be evaluated by similar criteria to those applied to positivist research, and also a rejection of an increasing trend in many disciplines for qualitative 'data' to be presented only to illustrate theoretical expositions (see Taylor 2012). Qualitative research in psychology is required to be rigorous, including in the data collection, data analysis and writing up. In particular, value is attached to empirical work as a period of immersion which is entered with openness, in order to bring the researcher to a new point of view or new ideas.

The psychosocial tendency to exoticise and selectively re-claim psychology is probably most evident in the avoidance of these qualitative traditions and the taking up of psychoanalytic theory and practice as a basis for methodology, for example in the work of Hollway and Jefferson (2000). This has been criticised on a number of grounds, including the inappropriateness of comparing the relationship between researcher and participant with that of therapist and client (e.g. Frosh and Emerson, 2005).

4 The articles

In the opening article to the issue Stephanie Taylor (this issue) outlines a theorisation of a fully psychosocial subject formed in discourse, that is, a subject located inescapably in a social context and yet one with personal histories and continuities. Taylor's concern is to lay out the purported difficulties in conceiving of such a subject, and to respond by elucidating the capacities for complex theorisation held within particular discursive traditions. Key to her argument are the qualities of situated, contingent, emergence; of patterned

continuities; of a subject always in the process of being made; and centrally for her argument, the theorisation of an incomplete subject, wherein lies scope for agency, change, slippage, but also stability and distinctive 'person-ness'. This complex theorisation is illustrated through a narrative-discursive analysis of identities in relation to residence and place.

The second article, by Jean McAvoy (this issue), explores the intertwined political, embodied and affective practices through which subjectivity is constituted. McAvoy's project is psychosocial in its integration of the multiple research foci of the individual and the social, and also its attention to the 'reproductions of macro ideologies in local, relational, intersubjective interaction'. The focus of the article is affect. McAvoy counters critiques which presume that discourse approaches separate 'the *feeling* of emotions' from 'just the *talk* of emotions' and are therefore not appropriate to the investigation of affect. She draws on one tradition of discursive psychology to analyse a participant's talk as affective practice through which emotion is simultaneously enacted and experienced. Discussing extracts from interview data, McAvoy shows how a participant's talk about her overweight body as evidence of failed self-control contains 'affective moments, situated activations of affectivity' in which the woman lives out a personal and moral failure as the 'autonomous psychologised agent' who is the ideal subject of neoliberalism.

In the third article, using the example of second generation Irish living in England, Marc Scully (this issue) teases out the interrelations of the personal and the collective. His interest is in the complex, multiple, personally and socially located entanglements which make up practical affective authenticity. Authenticity here is not the property of a 'real', bounded,

interiority, but something much more complicated, situated and interactional, but nevertheless subjectively and consequentially lived out. The article presents an analysis of interview data to explore the requirement to feel a particular national identification, and to recognise, and be recognised within, a collective understanding of that identification. Central to his analysis is an articulation of the way in which the precise interactional context gives rise to shifts in what can be marked out, claimed, and inhabited as authentic. Authenticity in this sense is simultaneously a subjective and affective practical resource for self and identity, and a problematic negotiation; startlingly fluid and contingent. It is both owned (albeit provisionally), and distributed, and therefore inescapably psychosocial.

The next article (Di Masso and Dixon, this issue) aims to move beyond a limitation of research approaches associated with environmental and social psychology, including discursive psychology, for investigating the material world and space. The authors, Andrés Di Masso and John Dixon, suggest that in order to research human-environment relations, it is necessary to 'transcend' a dualism which privileges either 'discursive practices' or 'real' features of the physical world'. They adopt as a new analytic unit a '*dynamic assemblage*' in which 'material geography, embodied practices, and language' are entangled over time.

The article presents a study of the struggles between residents, developers and local government around the development of a public space in Barcelona. Actions, events, relations and language uses are considered as they contribute to 'a complex assemblage of tangible and intangible practices' which creates two successive spaces, the Hole of Shame and the Wall of Shame. Using the framework of the assemblage to analyse a range of data -

language, pictures, observations – the authors produce an ‘account of emplaced subjectivity and social practice’ which, they suggest, is both complex and psychosocial.

The fifth article (Stanley et al, this issue) takes as its focus embodied psychosocial experience and refers back to William James’ metaphor of a ‘stream’ of consciousness. The authors, Steven Stanley, Meg Barker, Victoria Edwards and Emma McEwen, propose that the Buddhist tradition of mindfulness offers new possibilities for investigating such consciousness which has parallels with ‘affective practices’ (Wetherell 2012) and process philosophy, in addition to the longer tradition of phenomenological research in psychology. The article presents an analysis from a study, conducted in a Cardiff street, in which one of the authors was a researcher-participant. By adopting mindful awareness of her situation in time and space, she involved her body as both a topic and ‘a resource for the conduct of the research’. The article argues that this practice of mindfulness disrupts the taken-for-granted nature of participation in a social space in a similar way to the breaching experiments conducted by Garfinkel. In contrast to social psychoanalytic approaches, it involves the researcher-participant as ‘conscious psychosocial subject’.

For the authors of most of the articles in the special issue, the most pertinent issue concerning psychoanalytic theory is that psychoanalytically inflected methodologies tend to privilege the investigation of the individual, in terms of the psyche, over the social. This is noted, for example, by Taylor (this issue) and by Stanley et al (this issue). However, the first commentary, by Ian Parker, re-frames many of these criticisms by considering the discourse of psychoanalysis and the subjectivities which it constitutes. Emphasising that psychoanalysis itself is ‘culturally and historically grounded and should not be wielded as if it

were a 'metalanguage', a privileged perspective', Parker draws attentions to its contradictions and the points at which it turns on itself, critiquing and reinforcing its status as truth. Writing as an insider to the 'broad' field of psychoanalysis, he considers the potential contributions of psychosocial research to this critique, including the research presented in the preceding articles.

Parker locates his commentary on contemporary psychosocial study in relation to a culturally grounded psychoanalysis, one capable of reasserting a particular set of normative interpretations, but one which, critically folded back on itself, also makes possible a disruption to normative ways of thinking. In contrast, in the second commentary, Margaret Wetherell locates her comments in a set of forms of psychosocial study which operate outside of, and beyond, a psychoanalytic lens.

Wetherell marks out the underpinning qualities for the kinds of psychosocial projects demonstrated in this issue: a refusal to be reductive, either to the psychic or the social, a recognition of the generative, constitutive power of the conjuncture of socio-historical configurations with personal orders, the synchrony of multiple modalities (the discursive, the affective, embodied experience, the spatial) and crucially, attention to practices. This focus on practice is reflected in her description of the 'go-along', an interview method making available ways of seeing and experiencing the living out of the psychosocial subject, in this instance in practices of national commemoration, identity and (non)belonging in the context of New Zealand's Waitangi Day. It is a method that requires practical, affective interactivity to be interpreted through the conjuncture of macro and local politics, of social

and cultural resources, of personalised patterned histories, which give life to personalised acts, personalised subjectivity.

5 A different project?

The aim of this special issue is to present research which offers some alternative approaches. If embracing the psychosocial were equivalent to rejecting explanations in crude terms of *either* the individual *or* society, *either* the psychological *or* the social (often with the implication that those two divisions are identical), *either* micro level *or* macro – then it would not be a new project. As we have already noted, many social psychologists, and other social scientists, have a long history of working across those divisions. We propose that researching the psychosocial requires some conceptualisation of an interface, exchange or inextricable interrelationship, the weaving of complex connections and always the avoidance of a reductive slip back into the terms of one side or the other. The articles in this special issue contribute to such a conceptualisation by addressing a series of research problems framed in terms of differences, gaps or separations, with the purpose of resolving or even dissolving them. The resolutions are based in a range of theoretical approaches and illustrated with references to empirical work. The issue therefore offers an exploration of some of the currently under-appreciated issues, and possibilities, presented by psychosocial research.

Their common concern is to advance research on the psychosocial within psychology, understood as a broad and varied discipline, often closely linked to its cognate disciplines (such as sociology and geography), and ultimately central and vital to this latest ‘turn’ in research. The articles in this special issue set out a number of alternative approaches to

researching the psychosocial. Some discuss the issues raised by alternative forms of data, others the conceptualisation of a psychosocial subject. All are of interest for the bridges they build across less obvious gaps or divisions between 'psycho' and 'social'.

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