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## A Transdisciplinary Psychosocial Approach

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## **A transdisciplinary psychosocial approach**

**Paul Stenner**

### **Abstract**

This chapter is about a way of working with processes of experience in social settings (a critical transdisciplinary psychosocial approach). It contributes to theoretical psychology by stressing the importance of thinking psychological questions alongside questions raised by other social and human sciences and humanities. The word ‘psychosocial’ stresses an attention to experience as it unfolds in those networks and regimes of social interactivity that constitute concrete historical and cultural settings. The chapter distinguishes types of disciplinarity with the help of a contrast between Atlas (symbolizing disciplinarity and position) and Hermes (symbolizing transdisciplinarity and transition). A ‘tool-kit’ of six core transdisciplinary concepts is proposed (transition, liminality, transaction, transposition, foundation by exclusion, primary abstraction and transgression). These are illustrated with examples from the history of psychology. A case is made that ‘disciplines’ are themselves psychosocial phenomena that can be subject matter for this kind of approach.

### **Key words**

Psychosocial, transdisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, disciplines, social psychology, history of psychology, social constructionism, critical psychology.

# A transdisciplinary psychosocial approach

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## Abstract

This chapter is about a way of working with processes of experience in social settings (a critical transdisciplinary psychosocial approach). It contributes to theoretical psychology by stressing the importance of thinking psychological questions alongside questions raised by other social and human sciences and humanities (hence ‘transdisciplinarity’). The word ‘psychosocial’ stresses an attention to experience as it unfolds in those networks and regimes of social interactivity that constitute concrete historical and cultural settings. The chapter distinguishes types of disciplinarity with the help of a contrast between Atlas (symbolizing disciplinarity and position) and Hermes (symbolizing transdisciplinarity and transition). A ‘tool-kit’ of six core transdisciplinary concepts is proposed (transition, liminality, transaction, transposition, foundation by exclusion, primary abstraction and transgression). These are illustrated with examples from the history of psychology. A case is made that ‘disciplines’ are themselves psychosocial phenomena that can be subject matter for this kind of approach.

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## Introduction

Let us use the portmanteau word ‘psychosocial’ simply to indicate an interest in thinking psychological questions (e.g. questions of experience and subjectivity, affectivity, perception, memory, thought and imagination, character and identity and so on) alongside sociological questions (e.g. questions of social interaction, communication, practice and organization at various scales and in various more or less organized and regulated historical and cultural settings). Social psychology would then be one type of psychosocial practice; the work of the Frankfurt School would be another; the work of health researchers interested in social and personal determinants and effects of disease and illness would be another, etc. None of these types can claim exclusive rights to the psychosocial, and each has a different basic concept of the psychological.

Next, let us crudely distinguish some types of *disciplinarity* within psychosocial practice:

- First, social psychology is – for the most part – a *disciplinary* type of psychosocial practice. Although its origins are somewhere between psychology and sociology, for the most part social psychology today views itself as an experimental science and is to be found located in departments of psychology. It is part of the discipline of psychology (although let us not forget those more qualitative social psychologists who tend to find their home in faculties of social science, e.g. in departments of sociology).
- Second, much health research on social and personal determinants and effects of disease and illness is – for the most part – a *multidisciplinary* type of psychosocial practice. In multidisciplinary an issue is tackled in a coordinated fashion from various discipline-based vantage points, but these vantage points need not change in this effort. A disease like cancer, for instance, has bio-chemical aspects proper to bio-medicine, but ‘psychosocial’ variables may also be shown to have

relevance if they can be coordinated with bio-chemical variables into a bigger picture.

- Third, the work of the Frankfurt School and their followers tends to be *interdisciplinary* in the sense that concepts and methods from one discipline (in this case psychoanalysis) are transferred to another (sociology), yielding disciplinary *change* and sometimes a new discipline (now often called ‘psychoanalytic sociology’ or ‘psychosocial studies’).
- First coined in the 1970s by structuralist and systems theoretical figures like Piaget, Jantsz and Morin, *transdisciplinarity* is about movement across, beyond and through disciplines and hence concerns the *limits* of disciplines, and their *transformation* (Mittelstras 1993, Curt 1994, Thompson Klein et al 2001, Nicolescu 2002, Pohl and Hirsch Hadorn 2007). The origins of this concern lie in metaphysics, which aimed to provide an interpretive system that expresses the connections between the special sciences and thus generalizes beyond any given special science. The concept of limits implies borders, thresholds or boundaries which demarcate an ‘inside’ (what and who belongs within a discipline, for instance) from an ‘outside’. Disciplinary borders are complex and according to Stenner (2014) include: a) relations to other disciplines (*epistemological borders*); b) relations to undisciplined knowledge (*lay/expert borders*); c) relations to practical difficulties and problems (*pure/applied borders*) and d) relations to the broader society that supports or challenges its activities (*science/society borders*). Here we are proximally concerned with a) and b) (for c and d see Gibbons et al 1994, Stenner and Taylor 2008).

### **First example: disciplines as psychosocial phenomena**

A transdisciplinary psychosocial approach holds that: i) all social issues and problems have psychological dimensions, and that ii) psychological questions should be addressed in relation to the historical and cultural circumstances of a socio-material milieu. This means that a discipline is itself an interesting psychosocial phenomenon. Can a ‘discipline’ have psychological features like a ‘viewpoint’ or a ‘style of thought’? No, because what we call a discipline is in fact an abstraction that we use as ‘short-hand’ to designate the joint activity of the real concrete people and things that participate in it through their ongoing practice. These *people* have ‘viewpoints’ and ‘styles of thought’ which more or less inform their practice, but ‘the discipline’ doesn’t. But does this mean that these viewpoints and styles of thought are individual matters that can be explained outside of social context? No, the viewpoint of each ‘disciple’ is possible only as a collective phenomenon tied to and shaped by concrete social forms, frames and patterns of communication with their own history. Disciplines are cultural formations that produce not just specialist knowledge but also the specialists that produce them. Or rather – since a discipline has no agency – they provide the means whereby specialists can co-produce themselves and their knowledge. The psychological here is inescapably social, and the social is inherently psychological.

This raises another psychosocial question: *how* is some degree of generalization (of joint, coordinated activity and communication) possible? What, to put it differently, *collects* the collective of a discipline? What gathers a dispersed multiplicity of actors into a coherent and sustainable unity of ‘we-ness’? What, in short, acts as an ‘ordering principle’ and provides the *shareable* sense of ‘the collective’ here? Of course there are factors like the incentive of payment, the inspiration of a charismatic leader, the imposition upon a group of a task by powerful social actors, etc., but core to the ‘we-ness’ of any scientific

discipline is the shared *concept* of its subject matter, and the practice this makes possible. In this sense the disciples of a discipline are a little like the members of a totemic clan of the kind described by early social scientists: each clan ‘recognizes’ itself as a social unity by way of a shared identification with the clan’s totem. Hence the ‘people of the eagle’ cohere around their eagle ‘ancestor’ and differentiate themselves from the ‘people of the butterfly’. But this analogy is limited to the psychosocial mechanism of collecting a collective by reference to a shared mediating object. In other ways, scientific disciplines could not be more different from totemic clans. For one thing, science, unlike totemism - is about aiming to give accurate and detailed descriptions and explanations of its subject matter: it is a highly focused ‘epistemic’ activity that we find fully developed only in the context of highly developed ‘modern’ societies. The scientific *concept* of a subject matter is something more: it must compel scientists to abandon other concepts and to work with this one, and it must allow access to a set of concrete problems that can be solved when framed and approached in its terms. An *exemplar* in Kuhn’s (1969) sense is just such a model: Newton’s *Principia* and *Optiks*, Franklin’s *Electricity*, Lavoisier’s *Chemistry* or Lyell’s *Geology* each acted historically like *sources* of a spring, around which disciples gathered like thirsty animals, forming their disciplinary matrix as they did so.

A discipline, in short, is an institutional social reality ordered around a concept that creates a mental *groove* for its ‘disciples’. From all that there is in the world, this groove allows the disciples to live a life contemplating (and acting on) just a narrowly limited set of abstractions. The groove enables intense focus and prevents the disciples from distractions beyond their groove. Think of the groove in an old style record. When the needle is moving through the groove, the music of the discipline can be heard. If the needle strays across the groove, a horrible scratchy noise is all one hears – at least if one belongs to that discipline. What is ‘noise’ from one perspective, however, is music or ‘signal’ from another. The different disciplines are like psychosocial grooves in this sense. But what if an understanding of something as complex as human life *required* straying between and beyond these limited grooves? When psychology took itself as an experimental discipline capable of comprehending human life, it came to occupy the disciplinary space of a given ‘groove’ of knowledge-practice. But disciplinarity is not the only option. The psychosocial approach of interest here takes the gamble of *transdisciplinarity*: of transgressing or ‘straying across country’ by traversing the disciplinary grooves to express interconnections held in common.

### **Between Atlas and Hermes**

To more clearly mark this difference we can do as the Ancients did and imagine how a God of disciplinary practice might contrast with a transdisciplinary Deity. The Greek God Atlas can stand as a symbolic figure for disciplinarity, since in his mythology he was an inventor of disciplines (astronomy and its practical applications), and the personification of the endurance and strength needed to establish and hold firm a given territory. Atlas supported the weight of the earth despite being tormented by the many-headed Hesperian Drakon. Atlas is capable of standing powerfully astride a disciplinary territory, holding it firm and defending its boundaries with precision and authority. What is ‘inside’ the territory is his property and his business, but beyond that territory stands another Atlas, and then another, since all the territory is ‘carved up’. Goods can be exchanged between territories (interdisciplinarity), and alliances formed to conquer new territory (multidisciplinarity). But these activities are carefully controlled by Atlas, God of discipline.

The ethos of transdisciplinarity, by contrast, is encapsulated in the light and agile figure of Hermes (Serres 1992). Hermes is the winged God of boundaries, events, movement, translation, transformation and invention, and responsible for enabling communication between more stable figures within a given realm (e.g. between the Gods), and between distinct realms (e.g. the realms of Gods and mortals, the living and dead). This mobile Hermetic ethos of transdisciplinarity is orthogonal to the static (state-centred) ethos of disciplinarity. They should not be mixed up, since the strengths of one are weaknesses for the other. The Drakon with its many heads is a vivid symbol of the kind of complex, ambiguous and mobile multiplicity that is unbearable to an Atlas (God of *position*), but that is 'business-as-usual' to a Hermes (God of *transition*).

These qualities of transdisciplinarity differ starkly from those of disciplinarity, and yet the one presupposes the other. Steve Brown (1995) views them as "moments or conditions that any discipline may approximate". *Disciplinarity* indicates a highly bounded condition in which all relevant elements of knowledge are compartmentalized in well defined spaces rapidly surveyable by specialists. *Transdisciplinarity* indicates a moment of unboundedness in which elements and structures are in a flux of becoming that escapes disciplinary knowledge. Transdisciplinarity transforms what is established in disciplinarity, and disciplinarity fixes and controls what is newly invented by transdisciplinarity. Disciplinarity is concerned with capturing and holding still "what exists". Transdisciplinarity is concerned with the dynamism of forces at work in transformations (Brown & Stenner, 2009), or with "the dynamic of change /becoming /event itself... at the exact moment at which something happens... the moment in which one thing becomes another thing" (Motzkau, 2011).

Transdisciplinarity must not be confused with disciplinarity or judged by its standards, but, equally, can not be dissociated from it. Transdisciplinarity can look and feel very strange to those schooled in discipline, since it does not follow linear logic or build step-by-step in a pyramidal fashion. It can thus appear frankly illogical as it cuts transversal and zig-zag pathways that connect seemingly unconnected themes and issues. But it has its own hermetic rigour and rationale. To clarify what a transdisciplinary psychosocial theoretician might *do* I propose in the remainder of this chapter a tool-kit of transdisciplinary concepts that I have found useful. These concepts are intended to foster and enable both movement between disciplinary frames and a focus on the transitions and becomings typically neglected by these frames. These concepts are not self-contained, since each makes reference to the others. Together they supply a tool kit that is light enough to be carried by one that must change as it flies, and that must reconstruct its foundations with every voyage.

## 1. Transition

Disciplinarity and transdisciplinarity – grasped as above - show up as one specific example (restricted to the specific case of social knowledge practices) of a more general tension or balance of forces grasped in distinctions between 'being' and 'becoming' or 'state' and 'transition' or 'structure' and 'event', or even 'actuality' and 'potentiality' (Stenner 2008). What we call 'social structure', for example, concerns the more or less stable and recurrent 'positions' that are made available for people within a given society and that provide 'social identities' (stabilized with relevant rights, duties and statuses). We may have national citizenship, for instance, and we may be a mother or father, brother or sister, etc. Institutionalized professions like education, law and medicine create positions for teachers (and learners), lawyers (and complainants / accused), doctors (and patients), and we might also draw the bearings of our identity from less immediate notions like our class location or religious commitments. The *positions* made available in social structure

are highly psychologically relevant since they provide a degree of stability and coordination that steers and simplifies our activities in socially recognized and authorized ways. But they are only half the picture. Like a photographic negative, there is another side to structure: *transition* (Stenner and Moreno 2013). Without transition there would be no positions, since ultimately structure is the effect of continuous transitions. That is to say, people must also *move between* positions. If a doctor is also a mother and a class activist, then she must learn to transit between the demands of these positions. Likewise, a child who is a ‘pupil’ in school may leave school and take up a new position in a factory, perhaps with occasional visits to hospital. For every position proper to Atlas there is a transition proper to Hermes, and each transition involves the management of some sort of threshold or border. One becomes ‘something different’ when one crosses a border, and sometimes ‘the world’ changes too.

## 2. Liminality

The anthropologist van Gennep (1909) coined the term ‘liminality’ to refer to these psychosocial transitions. For Gennep the liminal phase was one of three phases of a *rite of passage* whereby transitions in status are managed in the context of the ‘pre-modern’ societies studied by anthropologists. In the first phase, the previous structural position is broken down and in the last phase the new one is ceremonially established. The middle or liminal phase, however, involves the temporary suspension of structure, such that initiates are neither one thing, nor the other, and at the same time *both* one thing *and* the other. They are in a paradoxical ‘state’ of ‘transition’ in which potentiality is at a maximum and actuality at a minimum (Turner [1969] calls this “anti-structure”). Liminality can be extended beyond ‘traditional’ societies if defined as the *experience of crossing a threshold* (entailing the *removal* of limits) or of *being on the limit of becoming something else* (Stenner and Moreno 2013). When we move from one country to another, or from a court-room to the street, the limits that apply in the one time/space (the norms, laws and expectations, for instance) are removed and replaced with those that apply in the other. Liminality would thus refer not just to the personal experience of transitions such as moving to university, or getting divorced, but also to each of the four borders that constitute a discipline (see above), or to the movement from consciousness to unconsciousness. Liminality supplies a ‘third term’ between ‘order’ (state, structure, system, position, etc) and chaos: it is a moment in which structure is *suspended* such that, in principle, something *new* can happen (transition).

## 3. Transaction

The concept of liminality insists that the borders, gaps and movements between states, positions, systems and disciplines - though not the concern of Atlas – are not ‘nothing’ (no-man’s land, empty space, etc.). They are space/times of ‘structural melt-down’ where new forms are created and experimented with. The concept of transaction thus guides where the transdisciplinary psychosocial researcher should look: transitions are where the ‘action’ is (trans-action). The normative structure which is the working equilibrium of a situation depends upon a latent reservoir of potentiality that is the source of any new cultural forms (‘anti-structure’). Meaning and new structure are generated *in the transitions* (*gaps, margins*) of structure, outside of Atlas’s gaze. Transaction indicates that transdisciplinarity is to disciplinarity what liminality is to structure. *Transitions* of fluid potentiality in both are contrasted with *positions* of concrete actuality. As human beings we are always *more* than the positions we in fact come to live out, but without social structure that potential could never become actual. In the same way subjectivity (as relatively unformed potential) always exceeds identity (socially structured and recognized subjectivity) and affectivity (our capacity to be affected and to affect others) always exceeds emotionality (our conscious and linguistically labeled feelings). The principle of

transaction also relates to the distinction between the psychological and the social: our 'psychology' is always *socially actualized* and that is why a psychosocial approach is always pertinent, but can never consolidate in a *disciplinary* space.

#### 4. Transposition

Disciplinarity demands clear *definitions* from stable positions, but transdisciplinarity recognizes that what is excluded by one disciplinary perspective is included in another. Any point of definition creates an undefined and out of focus 'fringe' that will itself be a point of definition for another, differently positioned, knowledge claim. Since transdisciplinarity entails transition from epistemic space to epistemic space, it must not get 'stuck' in one way of knowing. It must observe the observations of others from a 'trans-position', and must learn to 'transpose' (in the sense of changing musical 'key') from one position to another. Transposition thus points to a form of *perspectivism*. This does not simply mean 'truth is a relative matter of perspective'. It means that what we crudely call 'truth' is something that has a *place* and *time* where it works well *for* its knower, but that the same truth might be hopelessly inadequate when 'dis-located' outside of its 'home territory'. The important 'how to do it' issue here is to find *where* and *when* something is true, and that also means 'for whom' it is true.

The history of psychology itself provides an example of how a discipline can get 'stuck' with 'dis-located' truths borrowed from a very different field. Under pressure to be a proper natural science, psychologists imitated and borrowed the *methods* of natural scientists. In their 'home territory' these methods developed against a growing body of theory much like the shell of a snail (its hard 'methods') grows along with its soft body parts (its soft 'theory'). But since the hard parts of science were easier to copy the soft parts, psychology gradually came to identify its scientific status with its use of quantitative methods and its dream of using them to discover universal laws that would make it a stable discipline. Historically, this tendency was encouraged by the rapid development of statistical techniques and experimental design in the growing field of biological eugenics. Eugenics was a movement aiming to improve the genetic stock of the human population by encouraging the breeding of those thought to have a good genetic profile and discouraging those considered inferior (e.g. by forced institutionalization and programmes of euthanasia). The category of 'degenerates' typically included the poor, the disabled, the mentally ill, promiscuous women, homosexuals and certain vulnerable racial groups. Eugenics was invented by Darwin's cousin, Francis Galton who pioneered the use of the normal distribution and re-discovered the mathematics of the correlation coefficient, applying it to the study of heredity (psychometric techniques of factor analysis and regression were based on this). Ronald Fisher invented the other technique that has become standard in psychology (despite being developed to study pea-plant genetics): analysis of variance. He founded the discipline of population genetics and co-founded the Cambridge Eugenics Society in 1911. Together, these methods were particularly useful for dividing normals from abnormals and for identifying variables which predict them. These two developments practically define today's dominant positivistic type of psychology, which is not in fact grounded in a concept of the psychological but in its borrowed armoury of methods. It begins with the assumption that whatever 'psychology' might be, it must be approached as if it were a set of discrete quantifiable variables. To be a proper 'scientific' psychologist is to convert a plausibly psychological issue into a number of independent or dependent variables, and either to correlate these (and treat these correlations to something like a regression analysis or a principle components analysis), or to enter them into an experimental design treatable by analysis of variance or some equivalent technique for



statistical inference. Any 'theory' must accommodate itself to this imported frame of independent and dependent variables. The pea plants studied by Fisher lacked the complex inner life of people and their powers and activities are not so obviously dependent upon a highly complex social network of other peas. These things (inner life and social life) should be fundamental to psychological theory because they are fundamental to people's psychology. Importing Fisherian experimental designs into psychology encourages us to neglect such differences as inessential and to concentrate instead just on whatever can be more or less successfully shoe-horned into that design.

## 5. Foundation by exclusion

*Foundation by exclusion* expresses the intimate relationship between beginnings and *exclusions* and between identities and *expulsions* that is implicit in the other concepts (Stenner 2013). The foundation of something unified (a state, structure or system) involves expulsion and exclusion (Brown and Stenner 2009). Transposition is one example of this, since it is based on the fact that any point of definition assumes an undefined fringe that is not attended to. To think 'a' is *not* to think b-z. But this concept holds whether we are dealing with social groups, a system of knowledge, or even a biological organism. Girard, to give a social example, discusses how human collectives recurrently form around the figure of a scapegoat. Imagine a group thrown into crisis due to hardship or a natural disaster. Blaming and punishing a scapegoat (usually an unlucky outsider or marginal insider) has a unifying effect that can newly consolidate the collective by supplying a shared object of blame, and a focus for shared activity (e.g. of violence). In supplying new common-ground, scapegoating collects the collective. This provides a disturbing psychosocial model of how order can arise out of disorder through the *exclusion of a third party*. In a similar way we observe that behind the pride of a nation lurks the hostile exclusionism of racism; behind the economic power of the first world lurks the relentless exploitation of the third world; behind the techno-scientific modernisation of the human social world lurks the systematic exploitation of limited natural resources. The exclusions of Atlas are a *constitutive* part of the system. They are Hermes' responsibility.

The history of psychology provides another example. Immediately prior to eugenics, psychology had founded itself as a science, not just through the discovery of new 'facts' corresponding to a new concept of the 'psychological', but in an intellectual environment created through gestures excluding 'lay' or 'subjective' knowledge. Three obvious examples: Darwin's doctrine of evolution deconstructed our proud sense of being distinct from and superior to other creatures; Freud's doctrine of the unconscious deconstructed our pride in our rationality, and Nietzsche's doctrine of genealogical transvaluation deconstructed our proud sense of moral virtue. These blows to our sense of human nature were not simply about presenting positive facts: they are about claiming the Copernican authority of science to rid us of the illusions of biased and self-interested pseudo-knowledge. What is *cleared out* of the system is as important as what is allowed to remain inside. This gesture of founding objectivity by excluding subjectivity (a paradox given psychology's subject-matter) continued the theme begun in 17<sup>th</sup> Century physics (whose success was attributed to treating nature as a purely objective externality). As a result, experimental psychology took at least two forms in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Canguilhem, 1958). It emerged as an effort to positively demonstrate the falsifying illusions of subjective experience in the face of objective facts (subjective psychology), and as an effort to derive laws based on purely external observables (objective psychology). The former defines the human being *qua subject* as the source of knowable epistemological errors and perceptual illusions, and the latter implicitly defines the human being *qua object* as an externality amongst others, determined by causal laws. The

latter deliberately strips the human being of the interiority which is the sole source of its value and distinctness, whilst the former abstracts that interiority from its real context, and confronts it with the abstractions of experimental science.

## 6. Primary abstraction

Silvan Tomkins (1962, 7) echoes our concern with a shared *concept* when he states that “the most general assumption about the nature of its domain is the most critical single decision of a science”. A critical examination of candidate ‘general assumptions’ (primary abstractions) should be core business since these dictate *what* is to be abstracted (i.e. selected) from the world and taken as relevant to scientists. As Vygotsky (1982) showed us, the subjective psychology that was ‘traditional’ in his day took ‘the psychological’ to mean the non-spatial phenomena of the perceptions of an experiencing subject. The common notion that makes diverse phenomena legitimately ‘psychological’ is subjective experience or ‘subjectivity’. Pavlov’s ‘objective psychology’, by contrast, is based on a completely different primary abstraction: the common notion is actual observable behaviour grasped as reflexes and response actions of an organism. In Freud’s psychoanalysis the feature in common to all facts he considers ‘psychological’ is their unconscious nature. Each of these primary abstractions has a tendency to totalize the field: for Pavlov *all* psychology is treatable as ‘reflexology’, just as for Freud all psychology must start with the unconscious. The foundation of a science, no matter how hard, is thus always something soft: a concept. The transpositional task of ‘moving between’ positions rather than ‘totalizing’ them demands the recognition and articulation of primary abstractions, and, more importantly, how to move between them, and transgress their ‘totalizing’ tendencies.

### An example of limited transdisciplinarity: social constructionism

The transdisciplinary psychosocial approach that is the subject of this chapter emerged from my involvement in the early 1990s with the Beryl Curt Collective (see Curt 1994). It therefore makes best sense on the basis of an understanding of its roots in this UK based variant of critical psychology. More recently, however, I have made efforts to modify and deepen the theoretical stance of *social constructionism* that captured our attention. The terms ‘transdisciplinarity’ and ‘psychosocial’ thus mark a point at which social constructionist theory reaches its limits and requires re-visioning.

Social constructionism emerged as part of the sociology of knowledge and quickly influenced all of the social sciences. During the time of my undergraduate and doctoral training its influence spread into the critical fringes of psychology via texts like Gergen and Davis’s (1985) *The Social Construction of the Person*; Harré’s (1986) *The Social Construction of Emotions* and Kitzinger’s (1987) *The Social Construction of Lesbianism*. At its core lies the concept of a radical rupture: a conceptual discontinuity between two (apparently) incommensurable orders of complexity, one corresponding to an ‘energetics’ of brute physical causality, the other to a ‘hermeneutics’ of meaningful experience. A kick conceived in terms of energetics corresponds to the laws of physics (energy from the foot is transferred to the kicked object, for instance). But the same kick equally obviously has a hermeneutics. Depending upon the details of the case, the kicker may have acted in anger and the retaliatory punch they receive in turn can not be entirely explained in terms of the conditions of energy transfer, since it was meaningfully enacted.

This distinction afforded a powerful new primary abstraction to define the psychological: it pertains to hermeneutics. The psychological is a matter of semiotics, information, meaning, and this is a matter of *relations*, the primary and most obvious vehicle of which is *communication*. Harré’s (1997) discursive psychology, for example, expresses this

ontological division as two grammars: a p-grammar applicable to persons and an m-grammar applicable to molecules (see also Hacking's [2000] equivalent distinction between human kinds and natural kinds). M-grammar concerns causally deterministic interactions and is the ontology of choice for natural scientists, whilst p-grammar concerns the intentional actions of persons construed as more or less skilled performers subject to normative constraints. M-grammar is never irrelevant to human conduct (since we live in material worlds and are embodied), but, to the extent that conduct is meaningful and socially coordinated, p-grammar is needed to explain it (try explaining a game of tennis without recourse to its rules and aims). To impose an entirely energetic (or m-grammar) interpretation upon a hermeneutic (or p-grammar) scene is to make a 'category error'. Here politics quickly mix with epistemology, since to subject people to m-grammar treatment is to ignore their very humanity: to de-humanize them as if they were a mere mass of molecules. The political stakes become quite patent. For example, is mental distress to be viewed as a molecular disease of the brain of an individual or as a meaningful response to an interaction with a social context and history?

Social constructionism makes war on essentialism: it challenges any idea of a fixed, natural or essential order of things and views social order as enacted collectively through its repeated performance. In this way it deliberately mixes a science with a politics. This mixture must be situated as part of a broader intellectual climate in which the core assumptions of classical science concerning fixed order had been shocked, not just by developments in early 20<sup>th</sup> century physics, but also by advances in biology, computing, cybernetics, information theory, semiotics, structuralism, systems theory, and a host of philosophies giving a new centrality to information, meaning and language (speech act theory, existential hermeneutics, deconstructionism, etc all agreed that metaphysics was out and language was in). Alongside these transdisciplinary 'epistemological' shocks is the story of a changing socio-political context in which knowledge became contested in new political and cultural struggles. Kitzinger, for instance, showed how supposedly neutral knowledge about sexual orientation was in fact highly politically laden and thoroughly implicated in the *pathologisation* of homosexuality. Following the liberalization of the legal status of 'homosexuality' in the 1960s, it became patent that such early psychology and sexology was complicit in legitimizing and servicing a no longer socially acceptable institutional regime: i.e. a regime which now stood accused of human rights violations. Sexual orientation is just one of many comparable cases that came to the fore during a phase of 'identity politics' and 'reality questioning' that accelerated, intensified and extensified in the West – with particularly intensity during the 1960s - as the USA gained global dominance and Europe was re-constructed in the wake of the Second World War. European nations like Great Britain were forced to re-think their sense of natural superiority and greatness as their once vast empires were systematically reclaimed. Even physics, due to its centrality to the development of the nuclear weapons used to horrific effect on Japan, had become thoroughly *political*. The Beryl Curt group named this turbulent phase the 'climate of perturbation'. This was not just about sex, drugs and rock-'n'-roll. Feminist struggles (e.g. for women's rights), the anti-psychiatry movement, post-colonial developments and the civil rights movement, disability politics, the anti-war movement and the children's rights movement, for example, created conditions which exposed much prior knowledge as being thoroughly complicit in what are effectively institutionalised rights violations. This applied particularly to knowledge about such matters as normality and abnormality and about differences between genders, races, generations, nations, and so on: core business to psychology. Old certainties crumbled and the very possibility of neutral objective truth became routinely question-worthy.

The science/politics mixture opened up a new research agenda which sought to *deconstruct* the objective pretensions of knowledge claims, and to show their implications for ordinary people. The Beryl Curt collective thus came to construe and study psychological knowledge as a context bound communicative achievement ongoingly created through practices of 'knowledge mongering'. In the key work *Textuality and Tectonics: troubling social and psychological science* (Curt 1994), this *textuality* of knowledge was construed as unfolding moment by moment within a broader *tectonic* context. The transformations of the climate of perturbation, for instance, were likened to seismic shifts in the cultural crust of society. These shifts shattered and melted the taken for granted realities which had sustained previous regimes of truth. Instead of seeking after singular timeless truths in a mission of Enlightenment progress, the empirical task was grasped epistemologically as *critical polytextualism*: a careful explication of the multiple forms of partial knowledge/power that emerge around any issue of concern and compete, clash or form alliances in the construction of the reality of that issue. Methodologically this took the form of discursive studies or studies based on techniques capable of identifying and coordinating multiple viewpoints and types of understanding, like Q methodology (Stainton Rogers et al 1995). Ontologically, it involved affirming that reality is in constant process of construction and contestation and that no transcendent observing position is possible. All knowledge of reality is partial, subjective and limited, and so called facts are rather contentious versions of reality often bolstered by the authority of science and medicine, themselves historically emergent discursive practices whose genealogies are inseparable from broader issues (such as transforming modes of power and governance).

Social constructionism was rich and transformative, but it is important to affirm its limits. These limits pertain to its primary abstraction: the absolute split between energetics and hermeneutics, and its concentration on the latter. Ultimately this rupture reproduces the long-standing bifurcation of nature into a world of *matter with no meaning* (dealt with by the natural sciences) and a world of *meaning divorced from matter* (humanities and social sciences). Whitehead (1926) traces the bifurcation to problems in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century doctrines of physical materialism which held the natural world to be composed of discrete material components governed purely by efficient causality and subject to transcendent laws. Since this authoritative idea of a true reality of meaningless matter is completely incompatible with basic social assumptions of aim, meaning and purpose which were central to social practices like law, politics and warfare, a dualistic settlement was required (e.g. the Cartesian dualism). As science progressed and began to territorialize the human in the form of experimental psychology and positivistic social science, social constructionism offered one more variant in a long series of such dualistic settlements. In other words, in a defensive gesture in the face of this territorialisation, social constructionists claim 'psychology' as belonging to the human and social sciences *and not* to the natural sciences.

This critique of dualism is paradoxical because social constructionists pride themselves on questioning and attacking dualisms of all kinds. But they do so only from the hermeneutic side of their grounding distinction (i.e. by showing dualisms to be distinctions drawn in discourse, and hence forms in the medium of meaning). More philosophically astute constructionists like Harré (1997, 183), however, are acutely aware that they are in the business of denying dualism (e.g. the mind / body problem) precisely by way of a dualist ontology (the absolute distinction between p and m grammar):

... the ontologies of each 'side' ... are radically disjoint...: On the one 'side' there are molecules and their structures and on the other side are persons and their

actions. Molecules as subjects of predication cannot take predicates such as ‘responsible for’, while persons as subjects of predication cannot take predicates like ‘oxidised’... There is no ‘mind/body problem’.

In this way, psychology is claimed as a fully social science (p-grammar), but at the price of accepting the fact of a universe inherently divided into radically disjoint sub-universes of molecular matter and personal meaning when *both* conceptions are problematic. This is less a transdisciplinary transgression of the nature / society distinction than a *territorialization* of psychology by social science. Colonization by sociology and the social sciences is not necessarily better than that which gave rise to experimental social psychology: i.e. colonization under the authority of the natural sciences. Whatever our psyche is, it also bears a decisive relationship to our embodied existence and is not an infinitely plastic expression of whatever social demands a collective decides to impose. At least the word ‘psychosocial’ refers to the psyche which is otherwise lost in the abyss opened up between meaning and matter. Social constructionism, in sum, certainly involved a degree of transdisciplinarity, but this stops short at the boundary with the natural sciences, and indeed often enters into ‘science wars’ at that front (Harré deliberately avoids such conflict by allowing natural and social sciences their own distinct ontology). A genuinely transdisciplinary approach must grapple with the flawed materialism undergirding the bifurcation and not simply accept its disastrous consequences for the concept of the human and of nature. We must rise to the challenge of ‘transaction’ and look to the rupture between energetics and hermeneutics, not as an absolute difference, but as a barely understood liminal passage the understanding of which demands a rethinking of the concept of physical nature as such, and hence of our part in that nature (see Stenner 2005).

### **Conclusion: 7. Transgression**

To speak up for the excluded third and to put one’s finger on the sensitive point at which an identity is made possible by an exclusion: this is to betray a discipline by *transgressing* its constitutive principle. It is to open it up to transdisciplinarity. But a transdisciplinary psychosocial approach should not avoid the positive question of confronting its concept of the psychological. I hazard the following primary abstraction, influenced by Whiteheadian process thinking (see Stenner 2012): ‘the psychological’ is the process of relationship between a subject and its objects the result of which is the actualization of both. Let us call that process of actualization *experience* and let us call its objective product *expression*. Experience is the subjective process of actualization as it is gone through by the process in question. It is private or subjective, but its result – its expression – is an object publically available for the next experience to take as its object. To study only the public and external manifestations of a phenomenon (objectivity without subjectivity) is to miss half the story. We need the soft parts as well as the hard parts. This concept of the psychological has transdisciplinary application well beyond the field of psychology.

According to Greek mythology, Psyche is a delicate and graceful creature often depicted with wings, and often involved in the jealous disputes of Aphrodite and Eros. Just like the Goddess from which it gets its name, it seems to me that psychology (and social psychology in particular) now finds itself at an uncomfortable juncture where one of her wings is being pulled by the natural sciences, whilst the other is pulled by the social sciences. We must be careful that her wings are not pulled off, for then she will not fly. A transdisciplinary psychosocial approach holds that her logic is neither that of biology nor of sociology, since she is involved in both simultaneously, and reducible to neither. It

aims to put the psyche back into the social and material whilst keeping the social and material at play in the psyche. This, of course, is a tall order in the context of the established dominant form of psychology which flees from the word 'psyche' and laughs out loud at the notion of a 'soul'.

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