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Psychosocial research

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Introduction

The most notable feature of psychosocial research is its exploration of problems in terms of the interconnections between subjectivities and societies, in contrast to more conventional research approaches which might separate 'personal' and 'social' or 'micro' and 'macro' as distinct categories and levels of analysis. Some of the best-known psychosocial research has therefore been transdisciplinary, bringing the foci of psychology and psychotherapies to topics like class and climate change which have more usually been studied by academics from, respectively, sociology and geography rather than psychology. However, the relation of psychosocial studies to the psychology discipline remains complex. Many psychosocial concerns are those of social psychology, including self, subjectivity and identity, relationships and intimacy, and emotions, sometimes linked to the newer concept of 'affect'. In addition, there has been substantial input from psychologists into the development of psychosocial studies, through the work of both historic figures (William James, Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein) and contemporary social and critical psychologists, including Stephen Frosh, Wendy Hollway, Paul Stenner, Valerie Walkerdine and Margaret Wetherell. Yet many psychosocial academics have come from other disciplines, such as sociology and geography, and one sociologist suggests, in a rather caricatured criticism, that a major attraction for many students and researchers is that psychosocial research addresses conventional psychological concerns, such as 'minds', 'feelings', 'people', without 'the besetting positivism and scientism of much academic psychology' (Rustin, 2014, p.198).

The first section of this chapter outlines how psychosocial studies developed in part as a response to claimed deficiencies in the tradition of psychology which includes social constructionist and discursive psychology. The following section looks at a definition of psychosocial studies and sets out three key concepts which are common to the variety of theoretical and research-based writing presented as psychosocial. These are: the concept of an interface or 'inbetweenness', implicit even in the term psychosocial; the concept of the 'extra-rational' as aspects of problems and situations which psychosocial researchers attempt to capture, and the concept of 'affect' which has varied meanings but relates in some references to the extra-rational. The following section discusses several published studies as examples of the application of psychosocial research to real life

problems, with a special focus on the different methods which have been used. The final sections of the chapter review current trends in psychosocial research and discuss its future relationship to the psychology discipline.

Critique of mainstream social psychology mainstream theory and research

The formation of psychosocial studies as a distinctive area of research has followed in large part from critiques of the psychology tradition which includes social constructionism (e.g. Gergen 1985), discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell 1987; Wetherell and Potter 1992) and discursive psychology (Edwards 1996; Edwards and Potter 1992). This tradition, developed mainly in the 1980s, established within social psychology some of the premises associated with poststructuralism more generally. These include the rejection of predictive theories which model relationships and causality in terms of discrete factors, and also the rejection of the notion of a universal essentialist individual who may be to some extent socialised to adapt to a particular society but remains bounded and agentic. In addition, the discursive tradition introduced analytic techniques involving the close examination of language data. The development of the tradition has been associated with an attempt to shift psychology away from 'an old positivist paradigm' (Parker, 2012, p.472). However, this 'turn to language' inevitably came to be seen as introducing new problems.

Many of the critiques of the discursive tradition follow from its supposed concern with language as a purely linguistic entity, that is, with words as separate from their contexts and whatever they refer to and, relatedly, with language use as rational and intellectual, concerned only with logical arguments and connections. Discursive approaches have therefore been criticised for what they exclude, including the material world, embodiment (Blackman et al, 2008), experience, personal investment (discussed below), and 'desires, anxieties, and needs' (Woodward 2015, p.62). Although these critiques rest heavily on an interpretation of both language and discourse which can itself be challenged as overly narrow (Taylor 2015), they contributed to the development of psychosocial studies. For example, Paul Stenner (2014a), proposing a psychosocial approach which 'attends to experience as it unfolds in and informs those networks and regimes of social interactivity (practice and communication) that constitute concrete historical and cultural settings' (p.205), refers to subjectivity as 'an aspect of experience that cannot be reduced to discursive practices, even if those practices structure it and pattern it' (p.206, emphasis added).

This points to a further set of critiques, regarding discursive conceptualisations of subjectivity and the subject. In the discursive psychological tradition, the subject is assumed to be

socially constituted, positioned within multiple (and unequal) relations. Because these relations and the situatedness are fluid, the subject is fragmented and unfinalised in its identifications and sense of self, shaped by ongoing activities and interactions. Discursive psychologists therefore challenge theories of a universal subject, insisting on the inescapability of relationality and context, including the aspects of society which are commonly discussed as cultural, economic and historical. Discursive psychologists also challenge cognitive psychological models of the person as a bounded individual, criticising assumptions of internal mechanisms and functions. For example, part of the discursive psychological argument is that a discussion of conventional psychological phenomena such as remembering or emotion should confine its reference to observable actions within discourse, treating these as situated and oriented to the immediate interaction, rather than as the expression of the underlying mental processes (e.g. Edwards 1997) of a unitary 'container' subject.

This conceptualisation of a discursive subject is obviously inconsistent with most everyday or commonsense notions of the person. In addition, the notion that a person is no more than a loose aggregate of the different relations and positions given by multiple social relationships and activities, has been criticised by many academics. Yes, someone may be a mother and a teacher and a Green Party voter, middle class, Hindu by family religion, and so on, but doesn't she also have a distinctive personal identity which is separate to these (and other) categorisations and more than all of them combined together? Questions of this kind and attempts to understand 'subjectivity as more than a subsidiary effect, as more than the sum total of combined discursive positions' (Blackman et al, 2008, p.7) have contributed to the development of psychosocial studies in the UK.

One important starting point for an alternative theory of the subject was the collection *Changing the Subject: Psychology, Social Regulation and Subjectivity* (Henriques et al, 1984/1998), originally published in 1984. In this collection, Wendy Hollway argued that the multiple available identities or discursive positions are not all of equivalent importance (Hollway 1984/1988). As in her later work with Tony Jefferson, Hollway drew on Object Relations Theory to propose that an attachment to one particular discursive or subject position can be understood in psychoanalytic terms as an 'identity investment' (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, p.19). This investment is the outcome of a 'unique biography of anxiety-provoking life-events and the manner in which they have been unconsciously defended against' (p.24). Hollway and Jefferson's work therefore employs concepts from psychoanalysis and associated psychodynamic theories in order to address the problem of 'the disappearance of the (totally decentered) subject' (Hoggett, 2014, p.192) in the discursive tradition, and in doing so reclaims the continuity and interiority of the subject which

discursive theories had previously challenged. This is not the only version of a psychosocial subject but it remains central to psychosocial studies.

The narrative of critique which I have presented in this section is inevitably over-tidy and linear because the discursive tradition did not replace or even substantially disrupt existing (social) psychology approaches. It is now one of several paradigms, including so-called 'positivist' research, which co-exist uncomfortably within the psychology discipline. In this context, psychosocial research is sometimes invoked to present similar critiques of mainstream psychology to those previously offered by the discursive tradition (although usually in less caricatured terms than those of Rustin, quoted in the introduction to the chapter). For example, Christopher Groves et al (2015) present a 'psychosocial framework' to challenge the assumption that people are 'rational choosers of behaviours', criticising factor models in social psychology which centre on this concept. In another example, Rosalind Gill (2012), discussing 'the sexualisation of culture', argues against a trend of psychology-based US research which quantifies 'sexualised' media material and assumes a uni-directional influence or causality of 'harm flowing in one direction from the media to the individual' (p. 488). Gill contrasts this with research in media and cultural studies which, she suggests, is also problematic because it tends to overstate the 'active, knowledgeable, sophisticated and critical' nature of audiences and media consumers (p. 489). For Gill, psychosocial research can avoid these extremes; she therefore calls for

'psychosocial approaches that are capable of thinking about the complicated, entangled relationships between visual culture, desire and subjectivity, and rethinking media 'effects' not as discrete, measurable events, but as part of ongoing processes of the disciplining and reconstructing of selfhood – in which we are all implicated' (p.494).

These examples suggest that psychosocial research has to some extent taken over a critical position in relation to the psychology discipline as a whole, including both the discursive tradition and more mainstream areas.

Presentation of critical alternatives

The previous section offered a brief account of the development of psychosocial research as a critique of (some approaches in) social psychology, including discursive psychology. This section explores the distinguishing features of psychosocial studies, although the extent to which this coheres as a single field distinct from psychology is debatable. A useful starting point for discussion is provided by the following definition, developed for a recent book series:

'Psychosocial Studies seeks to investigate the ways in which psychic and social processes

demand to be understood as always implicated in each other, as mutually constitutive, coproduced, or abstracted levels of a single dialectical process. ... Psychosocial Studies is also distinguished by its emphasis on affect, the irrational and unconscious processes, often, but not necessarily, understood psychoanalytically' (cited in Frosh, 2014, p. 161).

The definition indicates the continuing importance for psychosocial studies of the concepts and theories from psychoanalysis which were introduced through the work of Hollway, Jefferson and others. The definition is open, suggesting that psychosocial research is 'often, but not necessarily, understood psychoanalytically' (emphases added), a point which has generated considerable debate. For example, Paul Stenner (2014a) has called for 'an open definition of psycho-social studies as a critical and nonfoundational transdiscipline' without 'the premature consolidation of a version... foundationed upon psychoanalysis' (p. 205). More specifically, Stenner rejects the psychoanalytic assumption of a separation between an 'inner world' and an 'outer world' (terms which are associated with 'British School psychoanalysis', Frosh, 2014, p.163), arguing that both are abstractions which derive from modernity. Other writers, including myself, have argued that it is not necessary to adopt the language of psychoanalysis to do the work of 'psychosocial', proposing instead that developments within the discursive tradition within psychology can similarly merge conventionally separate levels and entities to explore the mutual constitution of subject and social context (Wetherell 2003; McAvoy 2015; Scully 2015; Taylor 2015). However, for many academics the psychoanalytic is an essential feature of the psychosocial. For example, Woodward suggests that the term itself refers to 'the connections, and ...the spaces between the social and the psychic' (Woodward 2015, p.2: emphasis added).

The definition also indicates some key concepts for psychosocial studies. The first follows from the point that 'psychosocial' does not refer to two separate or separable components i.e. 'psychological' and 'social' or 'psychic' and 'social'. Rather, psychosocial studies theorise and research how these are 'always implicated in each other'. Various terms and theorisations have been offered for the new site or unity produced by such 'connections or interfaces between the person and the larger realm of the social, variously defined' (Taylor, 2015, p.9). The above definition refers to 'a single dialectical process' whereas Gill mentions 'ongoing processes' (plural) as well as 'complicated, entangled relationships'. Some writers have adopted an alternative spelling of the term 'psychosocial' as 'psycho-social', with a hyphen, in order to signal 'overlap and penetration' as another version of this mutual implicatedness (Hoggett 2014, p.192). The sociologist Kath Woodward using the language of psychoanalysis, opens the interface into a 'third space' that is

‘somewhere between the psyche and the social but that nonetheless involves both’ (p.88). Somewhat differently, Stenner (2014b) suggests that ‘betweenness’ can be conceived using the concept of liminality which ‘points to the importance of thresholds of transition, or zones of becoming’. It can be argued that a similar conception of mutual implicatedness already existed in social psychology, including in discursive psychology (Taylor 2015). Nevertheless, the concept an interface or betweenness is a key one for psychosocial studies and its project of connecting social and political issues with subjectivities.

A second key concept is indicated by the reference, in the definition for the book series quoted above, to ‘the irrational’. This term is of course taken from psychoanalytic theories. However, psychosocial research which draws on other traditions also attempts to go beyond the rational in its analyses, as in the attempts outlined above to take account of more than language, and also in Gill’s suggestion, quoted in the previous section, that psychosocial research can go beyond what is ‘discrete’ and ‘measurable’, including to accommodate ‘desire’. In this chapter, I therefore adopt the broader term of the extra-rational for this second key concept of psychosocial studies. This overlaps in its reference with a third key concept ‘affect’, although that term has a wider reference.

As part of its exploration of subjectivities and the extra-rational, psychosocial research often utilises the term ‘affect’ (in one but not all of its meanings) to refer to feelings and emotion, especially when reinterpreted as a social or collective phenomenon which operates between and across people rather than within individuals. For example, Steve Pile, reviewing influential writing on affect from the geography discipline, suggests that affect is defined in contrast to ‘cognition, reflexivity, consciousness and humanness’ (p.8), using ‘cognition’ in the sense of what is ‘thought’ or thinkable. Simon Clarke (2006), drawing closely on Hollway and Jefferson, suggests that the study of many ‘societal phenomena’, such as ‘racism, sexism, inequality and social exclusion’, requires an acknowledgement that

‘we are not just rational social creatures but live in a world of social relations that are tempered by feelings and emotive dynamics that are often not obvious, or to use psychoanalytic language, motivation in action is often unconscious’ (p. 1161).

Clarke’s work is therefore an example of psychosocial research which elides the irrational or extra-rational, the emotional and the unconscious.

An additional connotation of the term affect, following from the collective reference noted above, is that it can be used to refer to the transmission of feelings in some manner which is, again, extra-rational and even 'uncanny'. In this further elaboration, affect, unlike emotion, does not originate within the individual body but is assumed to be an unbounded and transpersonal flow, moving between bodies. The contribution of this rather difficult conceptualisation can be shown through a relatively early example from the work of the cultural theorist, Sarah Ahmed (2004). Ahmed is interested in how emotions move or flow between people, and also how they become temporarily attached to different objects or signs; she cites the example of fear becoming attached to an asylum seeker or a burglar. She suggests that

'the sideways movement between objects, which works to stick objects together as signs of threat, is shaped by multiple histories. The movement between signs does not have its origin in the psyche, but is a trace of how histories remain alive in the present' (p.126).

This is therefore an attempt to understand powerful feelings like fear and hate as social phenomena, beginning not with an individual psyche, as in a psychoanalytic account, but a sociohistoric context in which, by implication, the affects already exist and circulate, with the potential to become attached to new objects. To understand where they become attached, or how they 'stick' different words together, like 'terrorist' and 'Islam', it is necessary to investigate 'past histories of association' (p.127). Ahmed refers to an 'affective economy' but an alternative metaphor for her account might be a weather system in which global movements and changes produce local conditions of wind, temperature and rainfall. Her work indicates the potential implications of this conceptualisation of 'affect' as different to 'emotion', although in work of many writers on the psychosocial the terms are still used almost synonymously.

Somewhat differently, Margaret Wetherell (2012) uses the term 'affect' while retaining the focus on the emotions and the extra-rational (although not inevitably irrational) but rejecting a psychoanalytic or psychodynamic account. Instead, developing Ian Burkitt's argument (2014) that emotion must always be understood in relational terms, Wetherell proposes the concept of 'affective practice' which, she suggests, incorporates notions of 'ongoingness' and 'patterns in process' (p.23). The concept builds on the discursive psychological and ethnomethodological notions of ongoing practice as interactional and constitutive of the contexts and order of social life. Wetherell discusses affect as situated activity based on acquired practices, both social and personal: 'affective practice is based on a semiotic hinterland organised by personal biography' (p.153) and the ways that past practice results in an accumulation of 'affective habits and associations' (p.155)

which are 'carried forward into new relational fields' (p.155). For Wetherell, transmission can also be understood in terms of interactions and relational practices. She criticises accounts of the spread of affect as irrational, for example in the behaviour of protesting crowds. She suggests that in such accounts an us/them distinction may operate:

'We conclude that the affect of those we disagree with spreads by contagion, we decide that our own affect, on the other hand, when we protest, is simply caused by events and is a justifiable reaction' (p.148).

Yet another conception of affect is that associated with 'process' psychology (Brown and Stenner 2009)¹. An example is offered by Brown and Tucker (2012) who argue that the term 'provides a way of engaging with "experience" shorn of some of its humanist garb' (p.232) while also capturing some of its non-rational aspects. This position is presented in part as another critique of discursive psychology which Brown and Tucker regard as static, erasing 'flow and transformation' (p.234). They suggest that the account which they offer recaptures a 'dynamism' absent in discursive psychology (although, as with some previous critiques, their claims about discursive psychology can be disputed e.g. Taylor 2015). Brown and Tucker develop their account of affect from the work of Henri Bergson, adopting his notion of experience as doubly partial. Perception is 'a dynamic, adaptive process', selective and inevitably incomplete, which 'carves out' aspects of 'a mobile, ever changing reality' that can never be wholly captured (p.235). A paraphrase of their account might be that experience is a glimpse, from a limited viewpoint, of a fast-moving ever-changing scene, like the view from a dirty train window! From Brian Massumi, Brown and Tucker take the further points that this perception is a form of potential engagement with reality, shaped by the 'current needs ...situated concerns' and 'ability to act' of the perceiver (p.236) and producing, out of these relationships, the perceiver's sense of her/himself as an individual.

Brown and Tucker's work is an example of a different psychosocial approach, in a Deleuzian tradition (see also Motzkau 2009). Their account draws attention to experience as inevitably situated and shifting, linked to unstated (and unstateable) possibilities, so involving more than can be pinned down in rational accounts, and also as non-generalizable, since the possibilities or potentialities will be given by the particularities of both the immediate situation and the experiencing body. The difficulty, as they acknowledge, is to import concepts from philosophy into the social sciences, including social psychology. Brown and Tucker conclude that 'intermediary concepts' are needed to move from the general concerns of philosophy to the specificities of research in order to engage with participants' accounts of their situated experience and to illuminate potentialities.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of this form of psychosocial research is its orientation to futures and possibilities. This contrasts with the 'thick description' of what is or was which has characterised most research in the qualitative tradition, including in social and discursive psychology. The difficulty, of course, is to ground a forward analysis into the future, including potentials and possibilities, so that it is not reduced to free speculation. This is not a novel problem but Brown and Tucker's work suggests that a new challenge for psychosocial researchers is to address it by developing an empirical approach to the formulation of more grounded claims of this kind. The next section of the chapter outlines some examples of psychosocial research into 'real life' situations, including one article which attempts to address the issue of forward analysis set out by Brown and Tucker.

Applied psychosocial research

The previous sections have outlined the development of psychosocial research and introduced three concepts which characterise it: an interface or site of betweenness which links the problems of subjectivities and societies investigated by psychosocial researchers; the extra-rational as an aspect (or aspects) of these problems, and affect as one version of the extra-rational. This section will present some examples of psychosocial research into 'real life' situations to illustrate the variety of problems, forms of data and analytic approaches associated with the field.

An early and influential example of research described as 'psychosocial' was a project of Helen Lucey, June Melody and Valerie Walkerdine 'Transitions to Womenhood', which investigated the difficulties faced by girls growing up in the UK. The research was presented in their highly influential book *Growing Up Girl* (Walkerdine et al, 2001) and also in a 2003 article which I discuss here (Lucey et al, 2003). One of the aims of this research was to investigate social class by going beyond 'rational' accounts to investigate 'conscious and unconscious psychological processes ... not only in the research process but in the very constitution of contemporary gendered and classed subjectivities' (p. 279). (There is an obvious similarity here to Clarke's account, above.) This aim followed from the researchers' conceptualisation of a subject as 'not entirely rational' but defended (as in Hollway and Jefferson's work, also discussed above). A further premise was that 'class' is not a straightforwardly objective category, for instance, as defined economically, but rather, a sociocultural position involving 'identifications, 'dis-identificationsdisavowals and desires'.

The researchers on 'Transitions to Womenhood' conducted a longitudinal interview study and analysed their data in a three part procedure. The first part, common to most qualitative research projects, involved taking the interview data at 'face value', for example, as evidence of the events of participants' lives. The second part involved looking at 'words, images and metaphors', as in a discursive analysis of language data, but the main purpose here was to look for evidence of 'unconscious processes'. To do this, the researchers looked at the talk itself, for instance, 'Inconsistencies and contradictions, beginnings, fade-outs, connections, absences and silences', and also considered their own responses to the interview encounter, recorded in their fieldnotes. These included points in the interview when the researcher had felt bored or irritated or anxious; in psychoanalysis, these feelings can be evidence of unconscious communications or transferences. In a third stage of analysis, the researchers worked together to uncover further unconscious communications which may not have been recognised by the researcher herself in her role as the interviewer, talking to the families. Relevant evidence here could be a response or interjection from the researcher which changed the direction of the talk.

The example discussed in the article (Lucey et al 2003) comes from a family's discussion of whether their daughter would eventually move away from her parents' home. Part of the analytic interpretation was that the researcher's contributions created tension in the interview situation and also followed from her own experiences of leaving home. The detail of the encounter was interpreted as evidence for a more general claim based on the whole data-set, that it has been far less common and acceptable for working class than middle class young women to move some distance from their families, for example, to go to university or advance their careers. The analysis therefore included an interpretation of the extra-rational, specifically the unexpressed and unrecognised anxieties around girls leaving home and, more broadly, the meanings of home and stability for working class people, at a time in the UK when there was a major political policy of selling council houses, creating pressure for former tenants to move on as part of a trajectory of upward mobility. As this account of the article indicates, the research exemplifies many of the features of psychosocial research noted in the previous sections, including the use of psychoanalytic theory in an account of the extra-rational as part of an investigation of subjectivities and contemporary social problems.

A more recent example of psychosocial gender and family research is presented by Ann Phoenix and Bruna Seu (2015). This article discusses the effects of serial migration, a common phenomenon in non-affluent countries which results in members of the same family having to live

apart for long periods. The research the article presents investigates daughter-mother relationships in which the mothers migrated to the UK in the 1950s and 60s, leaving their daughters with other family members in the Caribbean, in most cases for a number of years. Drawing on a dataset of interviews with 39 women and 14 men who were child serial migrants, the article focuses on interviews with four of the women, analysing their stories of their childhoods, including their reunions with their mothers. According to the authors,

‘The women’s experiences of serial migration were psychosocial in that they were produced in particular sociocultural contexts and were central to their subjectivities as well as to their daughtering’ (p.312).

The analytic approach which is adopted in this article combines narrative analysis (which is not defined in detail as a separate approach) with ‘a psychoanalytically informed reading that is sensitive to the conflictual and dilemmatic nature of the psychodynamics involved in the reunion’ (p.304). This is similar to the first and second stage of Lucey et al’s analysis, except that Phoenix and Seu do not attempt to analyse the relationship with the researcher/interviewer or her responses. The analysis refers to Object Relations Theory and argues that

‘A psychoanalytically informed reading of the women’s narratives enabled a ‘thicker’, dynamic understanding of the women’s stories and captured the complex and conflictual nature of the reunion with their mothers’ (p. 313).

This analysis uses as evidence both the participants’ (reported) feelings and actions in situations which they describe, and the ways in which their accounts are structured, for example, with gaps, or juxtaposing references to past and present time. As one instance of this, the authors note that

‘The timelessness and switching back and forwards in the narrative hints at the multilayered, deeply disorienting nature of the reunion as not just being traumatic itself, but reactivating the old trauma of the separation’, p. 307)

Phoenix and Seu’s article therefore conforms to the general description of psychosocial research offered in this chapter, investigating a larger social phenomenon (the effects of serial migration on family relationships) through an analysis of subjectivities and attachments. The analysis refers (briefly) to affect. It refers to the extra-rational in psychoanalytic terms (e.g. ‘unconscious’, ‘repressed’) although the analytic approach differs from that of Lucey et al (2003).

A third study is presented in an article by Mark Finn and Karen Henwood (2009), published in a social psychology journal. This research investigated contemporary fatherhood through a longitudinal interview study with 30 UK first-time fathers, with additional data from focus groups. The researchers analyse the men's accounts to investigate their 'identificatory imaginings' (p.549) of fatherhood. These are understood to be shaped by both social meanings, including discourses of hegemonic masculinity and new fatherhood, and personal meanings, following from participants' aspirations and biographical trajectories. This is therefore another version of interface or betweenness, played out in the talk of the participants. Subjectivity and the social are here conceptualised in discursive terms. The authors discuss at some length their interpretation of psychosocial research, suggesting it involves

'a concern for what holds discourse and interiority/externality in place at the level of the subject, and what it means to be a person with a particular version of self and the world while not reproducing social/individual dualism or individualistic discourse' (p. 550).

This article is therefore relatively unusual in that it defines the psychosocial with reference to discursive, and narrative, but not psychoanalytic concepts (although see also McAvooy 2015; Scully 2015; Taylor 2015). Referring to critiques of Hollway and Jefferson's work and related approaches, Finn and Henwood specifically reject the use of psychoanalytic theorising, stating

'we want to maintain a concern for internal life that is not separate from the social world and discursive repertoires that shape it, but nor do we want to essentialize this interiority in psychoanalytic and truth-testifying terms' (p. 550).

The fourth example of psychosocial research to be discussed in this section addresses a problem more usually associated with geography or environmental studies than psychology. The research project, Energy Biographies, was conducted by an interdisciplinary group of researchers, including psychologists, to investigate socio-environmental sustainability by looking at people's energy-use practices and their decisions (not) to adopt more sustainable practices, like cycling. In a 2015 article, Christopher Groves, Karen Henwood, Fiona Shirani, Catherine Butler, Karen Parkhill and Nick Pidgeon propose that life practices must be understood in their social settings and in relation to biographical experiences. The analysis presented in the article focuses on 'transformative moments' (Groves et al, 2015, p.9) in the formation of attachments to particular practices. The authors argue that these moments are linked to emotional meanings or investments and to valued identities. Like Phoenix and Seu, Groves et al refer to Object Relations Theory but without attempting the analysis of transference utilised by Lucey et al. The psychosocial approach of Groves et al uses interview

material as evidence of people's practices, memories, experiences and feelings, treating it as reliable reportage without exploring the narrative or discursive features referred to by Phoenix and Seu. This article presents its approach as a challenge to the use of multi-factor modules to explain decision-making and behaviours, challenging 'models of social change that assume individuals can be treated as rational choosers of behaviours'. In this respect, it can be seen to challenge mainstream social psychology. An additional notable feature of the study is that, although working in a different theoretical tradition to Brown and Tucker, it engages with the problem they considered, that is, a future-oriented analysis which produces findings concerning possibility of change. In this case, the concern is for changes to more environmentally sustainable practices. Groves et al recognise how attachments to current practices are linked to identity. They argue, however, that individual and shared patterns of attachment do not inevitably produce resistance to change but, equally, can 'encourage participation in more sustainable practices, as part of an identity' (p.25). They therefore suggest that the analytic framework they present 'opens up the possibility of connecting practice-theoretical approaches to psychosocial work relating to lifecourse transitions' (p.26).

Current trends in psychosocial research

The relationship between (social) psychology and the field of psychosocial studies or psychosocial research remains complex. Psychosocial research utilises concepts and whole areas of theory which are strongly associated with psychology, while rejecting most of the discipline's established approaches, sometimes in caricatured terms. In this respect, psychosocial studies might appear to be the successor to the tradition of social constructionism, discourse analysis and discursive psychology, or even the latest 'turn' in that tradition, taking up a critical and innovative position in relation to mainstream psychology. An important difference is that so many psychosocial academics locate themselves outside psychology, either defining psychosocial studies as a new discipline or retaining their previous association with other disciplines in the social sciences or humanities. In addition, their theoretical and methodological allegiances remain extremely varied (psychoanalytic, Deleuzian, narrative, discursive...). At the time of writing, psychosocial research continues to have a strong institutional presence in the UK through named departments, research groups, research projects and journals which are associated with a number of universities. However, there is so little agreement on the reference of the psychosocial (or even the spelling of the term: 'psychosocial' or 'psycho-social') that the field seems less likely to cohere further than to divide again, perhaps into social psychoanalysis, transdisciplinary psychology and the (existing and already varied field of) narrative. The psychosocial label could be retained as a reference for a common concern, that is, the

investigation of the interconnectedness of society and subjectivities, utilising methods which admit of some capture of the extra-rational, however conceived.

Summary

This chapter has discussed the field of psychosocial research or psychosocial studies as it relates to social psychology. Critiques of the conceptualisations of the social and psychological subject associated with the discursive tradition in social psychology led to the introduction into academic research of concepts and methods (such as the analysis of transference) associated with psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. Following these initial developments in psychosocial research, academics in a range of disciplines have drawn on varied theories and methodological approaches to explore problems of society and subjectivities, conceptualised as inextricably interconnected and not reducible to different 'levels' of explanation or interpretation, or to rational relationships of causality or influence. The chapter has proposed that three key concepts characterise the field of psychosocial studies: an interface or betweenness which is neither psychological (nor psychic) nor social; the extra-rational, and affect. A review of different sources was presented to illustrate these, then four published studies which their authors categorised as 'psychosocial' were discussed to show the range of psychosocial research and its applications to different 'real life' situations. A review of current trends acknowledged the continuing variety within psychosocial studies despite the common purpose and concepts identified here, and the possibility that the 'psychosocial' (or 'psycho-social') label will not be sufficient to contain this variety in the future.

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ⁱ Paul Stenner notes (personal communication) that affect is often concerned with accommodating modes of being and reasons for action that are important but might fall short of the conventional definitions of rationality; arguably, affectivity has its own 'logic' or version of 'rationality', and it is too crass to characterise that as simply 'irrational' (as in the classic modernist split between reason and emotion). This is another reason for adopting the term 'extra-rational'.