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## **Once more with feeling: What is the psychosocial anyway?**

**PETER REDMAN**

### **Abstract**

This article asks if psychosocial studies can be distinguished from neighbouring fields of inquiry and what, if anything, constitutes a ‘shared language’ among the psychosocial field’s different ‘dialects’. It briefly explores a number of common confusions about psychosocial studies (concerning the field’s relationship to the psychosocial of health science; its newness or otherwise; and the status of psychoanalysis within it), before interrogating two central formulations of the nature of psychosocial study: the claim that the psychosocial refers to the ways in which the psychic and the social demand to be ‘thought together, as intimately connected or possibly even the same thing’ and the notion of a negative practice in a positive structure.

**Keywords:** psychosocial studies; the psychosocial; transdisciplinarity; negative practice in a positive structure.

Faced with the question, ‘What is the psychosocial?’ anyone working in psychosocial studies could be forgiven for emitting a heartfelt groan. For one thing, the question is not new and he or she might wonder if much remains to be said on the matter (see, among others, Clarke and Hoggett, 2009; Frosh, 2003, 2010, 2014; Frost and McLean, 2014; Hollway, 2004; Richards, et al., 2009; Stenner, 2014, 2015; Stenner and Taylor, 2008; Walkerdine, 2008; Woodward, 2015). Equally, as a 2008 special issue of *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* (13/4) showed, debates about the nature of the psychosocial can be fractious and divisive, threatening to split the field and divert us from the more important task of doing psychosocial studies. Why risk opening old wounds? Finally, there is a good case to be made for the idea that definitional questions are better resolved through concrete investigation rather than abstract discussion. In other words, we might think that a better understanding of the psychosocial will be reached if we approach it incrementally through actual research, rather than by endlessly talking about it.

I have much sympathy with those points and no desire to engage in theory wars or abstract navel gazing. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to revisit the question posed by my title. The first of these can be found in the confusion often felt by people looking in on psychosocial studies from the outside. An example of this phenomenon is evident in a contribution to the edited volume *Memory and the Apartheid Archive: Towards a Transformative Psychosocial Praxis* (Stevens et al., 2013). In this collection, the community psychologist, Christopher C. Sonn asked if the psychosocial field's ambition to transcend the individual-social dualism is as distinctive as it seems to imagine (for this ambition see, for instance, Frosh, 2003; Hollway, 2006). Surely, Sonn suggested, 'numerous' schools and approaches 'have understood the psychical and social as interrelated' and have 'strive[n] to overcome the subject-social dualism, which has long hampered the development of a relevant and applicable social psychology' (Sonn, 2013, p. 230). As Sonn did not quite say but seemed to imply: isn't the psychosocial just another word for what many of us do anyway?

If confusion among outsiders to psychosocial studies is reason enough to return to questions about the nature of the psychosocial, a second and arguably more pressing one can be found in the lack of consensus that exists in the field itself. Definitional statements about psychosocial studies are often remarkably different. For instance, in a 2003 essay, Stephen Frosh defined the field in terms similar to those with which Sonn took issue. Psychosocial studies, Frosh wrote, provide 'a space in which notions that are conventionally distinguished – "individual" and "society" being the main ones – are instead thought of together, as intimately connected or possibly even the same thing' (p. 1547). In contrast, many other writers view psychosocial studies as an applied form of psychoanalysis. For instance, Paul Hoggett (2015) describes psychosocial studies as marking 'an unprecedented revival in the application of psychoanalysis to the social sciences' (p. 50). Similarly, although acknowledging different approaches to the psychosocial, Simon Clarke (2009) defines the field with reference to questions of 'method and practice' (p. 111), specifically the use of psychoanalytically informed qualitative research methods. Studies of the psychosocial, he writes, deploy innovative qualitative methods to bring to awareness 'the unconscious and emotional dynamics that fuel the social construction of realities' (p. 112).

Meanwhile, Paul Stenner (2014) explicitly rejects the idea that psychoanalysis is foundational to the psychosocial project, viewing it instead as one of 'transdisciplinarity' (p. 205). For Stenner (2015), studies of the psychosocial constitute a kind of anti-discipline, one defined by

its attempt to navigate the ‘constitutive outside’ of sociology and psychology as disciplinary entities – that which is excluded from knowledge in their ongoing formation. As Stenner, writing with David Taylor (2008), put this point,

With *transdisciplinarity* we are dealing in part with that which *escapes* disciplinary knowledge. In other words, if interdisciplinarity were the careful setting up of trade-routes between pre-established disciplines, then transdisciplinarity would be the invention of new spaces of knowledge and practice that transform the existing territory by opening it up to the new. If the former might combine, say, psychological and sociological findings, the latter would address a hybrid psychosocial space that neither psychology nor sociology adequately comes to terms with. (p. 431)

That diversity and the definitional looseness it entails have often been seen as strengths. For instance, writing in the special issue of this journal that brought together papers from the Association for Psychosocial Studies’ (APS) 2014 launch event, Frosh (2014) suggested that definitional looseness is advantageous at a point in the field’s development when, ‘imposing too tight a structure around it ... [still] risks closing down debate and strangling the possibilities for growth’ (p. 163). Stenner and Taylor (2008) made a similar point when they argued, ‘it is precisely the freedom from *disciplinarity* that makes psychosocial studies potentially interesting and productive’ (p. 426).

Yet such openness comes at a cost, as Frosh (2003) has acknowledged. A ‘policy of multiplicity’, he writes, ‘which might be adopted on a principled basis, creates its own incoherence, raising difficulties for joint work and for the creation of a shared language out of which a powerful psychosocial perspective might emerge’ (p. 1562).

Incoherence is not the only risk, of course. Also writing in the APS launch event special issue, Sasha Roseneil (2014) made the pragmatic case that, without a ‘collective voice’ we will have little ‘hope of getting ... our field acknowledged, our problematics considered, [or] our graduate students funded’ (p. 132). Moreover, as Roseneil went on to warn, in the absence of Frosh’s ‘shared language’, the psychosocial field is vulnerable to colonisation or reabsorption by its ‘parent’ disciplines, just as other interdisciplinary projects have proved to be in the past (p. 133). We could add that it is also vulnerable to accusations of redundancy – precisely the charge Sonn levelled against it.

With those problems in mind, I plan – in the main part of this article – to interrogate two formulations about the nature of psychosocial study that, although making no claims to bring those problems to a resolution, may contribute to our thinking about them. The first formulation – the idea that the psychosocial refers to ways in which the social and the psychic should be, in Frosh’s words, ‘thought together, as intimately connected or possibly even the same thing’ – returns us to Sonn’s complaint that psychosocial study seems merely to replicate the ambitions of other disciplines and sub-fields. Taking this complaint seriously, I aim to investigate what might be distinctive about psychosocial studies’ attempts to rethink the interconnection between the psychic and the social, even if these attempts inevitably draw on and overlap with work in other areas.

The second formulation – that psychosocial study involves a negative practice in a positive structure (Rustin, 1998) – takes us to the heart of one of the field’s more divisive debates. At stake here is the question of whether or not psychosocial work should be concerned with ‘positive’ knowledge (broadly speaking, knowledge of things that can be shown to exist through observation, measurement and similar means). If the notion of the psychosocial entails an awareness of the unconscious and the ways in which it undoes what we believe we know – or, in its transdisciplinary guise, an emphasis on process and becoming – then surely (the argument goes) studies of the psychosocial should be concerned with the ‘negative’. In other words, they should be concerned with what escapes being known, is missing or cannot be acknowledged, or with the moments before things take on a definite form or in which they meet their limit, come undone and start to change. But if that is so, what becomes of our attempts to understand things positively: to identify what something is, how it has come about and how it might be made better? Is positive knowledge of that kind still desirable or even possible?

Those questions have often produced answers that are either for the negative and against the positive or vice versa (see, for instance, Day Sclater, et al., 2009; Frosh and Baraitser, 2008; Frosh, 2007, 2010; Stenner, 2015). Yet writing nearly twenty years ago, Michael Rustin (1998) proposed that we approach these questions in a both/and manner, advocating a ‘negative practice’ that at the same time acknowledges its dependence on and ability to contribute to a ‘positive structure’. Revisiting Rustin’s argument, I will be asking if it is merely an attempt to occupy the ‘soggy middle ground’ or if it gives us elements of, in

Frosh's words, a 'shared language' that simultaneously avoids 'strangling possibilities for growth'.

Before embarking on those tasks, however, I want briefly to say something about three other matters that often seem to cause confusion in discussions about the psychosocial and psychosocial studies. These areas of confusion have been addressed before but I think stand another outing.

### **Psychosocial confusions**

Among the questions frequently asked about psychosocial studies are: how do psychosocial studies relate to the 'other' psychosocial (that of the health sciences and allied disciplines); how new are psychosocial studies; and what exactly is the status of psychoanalysis in the field?

The short answer to the first of those questions is that, although ideas about the psychosocial in psychosocial studies and the health sciences overlap, there are also significant differences. Most obviously, both fields share the assumption that phenomena usually considered from either a psychological or a social perspective will often demand to be viewed through a lens that combines the two. In George L. Engel's (1977, 1981) ground-breaking work, this emphasis takes a form congruent with psychosocial studies. For Engel, the 'biopsychosocial' (his usefully expanded term) is as an ensemble of systems that are open to each other and cannot be separated except for analytic purposes. However, as Wendy Hollway (2006) has argued, the psychosocial is more commonly approached by the health sciences in an 'additive' manner (pp. 467-468). A condition, schizophrenia say, is understood to have a range of causes and consequences that require a multi-faceted response: psychiatric, psychological, social work-based, spiritual. From the point of view of psychosocial studies, missing from this approach is an attempt to think about how psychological and social factors *interrelate* or, as Frosh (quoted above) argued, how they might be thought of as 'the same thing' – a single process.

The second question – how new are psychosocial studies? – is often answered in terms that stress the field's relative novelty. For example, in an editorial statement accompanying Karnac's 'Exploring the Psycho-Social' book series, Hoggett (n.d.) writes that, "'psychosocial studies' ... emerged as an embryonic new paradigm in the human sciences' in the

1990s and, despite making ‘considerable headway’, ‘remains at a very early stage of development’.

It is certainly the case that psychosocial studies as a named institutional entity have a relatively short history. By common consent, they first appeared in the UK at the University of East London (UEL), which began teaching an undergraduate degree in psychosocial studies in 1985 (UEL, n.d.; Walkerdine, 2008).<sup>1</sup> However, the history of the ‘psychosocial’ as a term is much longer. Indeed, Roseneil’s (2014, p. 120) Google Scholar search suggests 1800 as the date of its first appearance in print (the *OED* has it as 1890). Of course, the meanings the term held at the time it initially appeared will not necessarily accord with those given it in psychosocial studies today. These more recent meanings are not without precedent, however. Erik Erikson’s (1950/1995) delineation of eight stages of psychosocial development in Chapter 7 of *Childhood and Society* is probably the most obvious example but others can easily be found. To take only one, in the same year that *Childhood and Society* was published, Eric Trist (1950/1990), one of the founders of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, gave a paper entitled ‘Culture as a psycho-social process’. In it, he described ‘the way in which psychological forces, unconscious as well as conscious, at the level of the group and of the individual, interact[] with structural forces to bring into existence a concrete “field” with a dynamic pattern ...’ (p. 540). (See, also, Hollis, 1964).

If the psychosocial as a named concept preceded psychosocial studies, often in ways that overlap with the term’s use in the field today, it will be even more obvious that current psychosocial debates draw on earlier work that, although not using the term psychosocial, nevertheless mapped similar terrain. Among numerous examples, we can cite Freud’s work on the psychology of groups, religion and civilization (Freud, 1921, 1927, 1930); Frankfurt school critical theory (Adorno, 1967, 1968); work in the social defences against anxiety tradition (see, Armstrong and Rustin, 2015); and the cultural and personality school (Benedict, 1934; Mead, 1935). In short, although psychosocial studies as an institutional entity are relatively new, and although they mark a revival of interest in ways in which the social and the psychic inter-relate, the psychosocial project, named or otherwise, is not.

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<sup>1</sup> Psychosocial studies had an earlier institutional incarnation in the USA. A Center for Psychosocial Studies (now the Center for Transcultural Studies) was established at Penn State University in 1973. See, Center for Psychosocial Studies, n.d.

Mention of psychoanalytic work that, retrospectively at least, might be seen to form a psychosocial tradition brings us to the third question frequently asked of psychosocial studies – what exactly is the status of psychoanalysis in the field? Confusion about this question doubtless arises because of conflicting definitions of the psychosocial of the kind I described earlier. As indicated, some commentators stress the centrality of psychoanalysis to studies of the psychosocial or view psychosocial studies as an applied version of it while, for others, the psychosocial can be studied without reference to psychoanalytic ideas. How, then, should we understand the psychosocial field's relation to psychoanalytic thought? There can be little doubt that psychoanalysis is a – probably *the* – major intellectual resource for psychosocial study, a fact that makes the field the most significant space for the exploration of psychoanalytic ideas in contemporary social scientific research, at least in the UK. However, the existence of a vibrant strand of psychosocial inquiry that does not take psychoanalysis as its point of departure, clearly tells us that psychoanalysis is not the only game in town (see, Taylor and McAvoy, 2015). As important, there are good reasons why even those of us deeply influenced by psychoanalytic thought might want to avoid positioning psychoanalysis as the field's 'master' discourse.

As Frosh (2010) has argued, if psychoanalysis is seen as definitional of the field we risk downgrading other bodies of knowledge with which psychosocial inquiry is deeply engaged (pp. 92-97). These other bodies of knowledge – sociological, philosophical, historical and political – are arguably as important as psychoanalysis in generating psychosocial understanding. It is, for instance, the absence from psychoanalysis of a historically and sociologically attuned sense of how the social and psychological inter-relate that makes psychosocial study necessary in the first place.

Equally, as I will go on to explore later in this article, it is possible that psychoanalysis points towards something that cannot be assimilated to psychosocial or any other kind of study. If this is so, psychoanalysis might be better thought of as a generative but unsettling interlocutor for psychosocial studies rather than as the field's master discourse or as something that can be 'applied' in a straightforward manner.

### **The psychic, the social and their inter-relationship**

Having addressed those areas of confusion about psychosocial studies, we are now in a position to return to the formulations that, earlier in this paper, I suggested might help us



think about a shared psychosocial language and distinguish the field from other modes of inquiry. The first of those formulations – the notion that the social and the psychic should, as Frosh (quoted above) put it, be ‘thought together, as intimately connected’ – is one of the most familiar ways in which the psychosocial is defined and surely one of the most useful. Yet, as I have suggested, for people outside the field, definitions of the psychosocial framed in such terms can be a source of confusion, not least because they appear to duplicate the intellectual projects of other disciplines and sub-fields. If, for instance, social and critical psychology already address the ‘intimate connection’ between the psychic and the social, what need of psychosocial studies? That confusion indicates that we need to clarify what it means to think the psychic and the social together in specifically psychosocial terms.

The psychosocial field is probably most obviously distinguished from its neighbours by its aspiration to address the *range* of psychic and social dimensions that constitute the phenomena it investigates. In other words, studies of the psychosocial take seriously what we conventionally think of as the intra-psychic, the intersubjective, the group, social interaction, social system and social structure, together with the ‘intimate connections’ between them. Other disciplines and sub-fields address some of those dimensions and some of the connections but do not seek to keep all of them in play. Of course, individual psychosocial studies will not necessarily address that range in full either. Nevertheless, as a field, studies of the psychosocial seek to bring together the various elements of that range, better to understand psychological and social life.

In addition, when addressing the ways in which the social is present in and productive of psychic life, psychosocial studies characteristically emphasise the ‘density’ and ‘relative autonomy’ of the latter. To put that differently, psychosocial arguments commonly assume that psychological, emotional and somatic states and processes – conscious, unconscious and nonconscious – have a life of their own and cannot be reduced to social meanings and practices, despite the fact that those meanings and practices are always implicated in them. The point of reference here – the thing against which this emphasis sets itself – is, of course, the over-socialised account of the subject found in social constructionism and parallel projects. If these projects mark a rejection of under-socialised understandings of subjectivity – such as those found in many kinds of psychoanalysis – then, to paraphrase Paul Stenner (2014) the idea of the ‘psychosocial’ can be understood as a point at which they themselves ‘reach their limit’ and ‘require re-visioning’ (p. 206).

As one would expect, it is in psychosocial studies influenced by Kleinian and object-relations theories that we find the strongest emphasis on aspects of subjective experience that can be thought of as possessing ‘density’ and ‘autonomy’ (see, for instance, Hollway, 2006; Hoggett, 2008). For many in psychosocial studies, these theories’ accounts of the liveliness of the ‘internal world’ – the ways in which our encounters with people and things can be said to be mediated by drive- and object-related unconscious fantasy, transference, projective identification and introjection – provide a rich and highly differentiated vocabulary with which to attend to and describe subjective experience.

However, the notion that human experience has a density and autonomy that social constructionism and other projects often neglect is not limited to psychosocial studies in the Kleinian and object relations traditions. For instance, although working with a very different understanding of ‘psychic reality’ from those traditions, Paul Stenner writes that, through his participation in the Beryl Curt collective, he ‘began early on to take subjectivity seriously as an aspect of experience that cannot be reduced to discursive practices’ (p. 206). Similarly, Frosh, who has been famously sceptical about Kleinian-influenced accounts of ‘internal worlds’ (Frosh and Baraitser, 2008), nevertheless stresses the importance of ‘giving value to personal experience, ... affect, embodiment, agency and the impulse to articulate a kind of ethical subject’ (Frosh, 2015, pp. 3-4). As he goes on to write, although ‘supposedly “internal” states associated with subjectivity are produced in and by sociality, ... [they] also have an important degree of autonomy...’ (p. 4).

Conversely, when addressing the ways in which psychic processes are present in and productive of social life, psychosocial studies characteristically emphasise the ‘density’ and ‘relative autonomy’ of the social. As Hoggett (2008) has put this point, the social world has ‘its own rules of structure formation’ that cannot be reduced to the psychic processes that are implicated in it (p. 383; see also, Frosh, 2010, p. 67). As that suggests, just as the psychosocial field’s emphasis on the density and autonomy of subjective experience is an attempt to move beyond over-socialised accounts of the subject, its emphasis on the density and autonomy of the social world marks a rejection of something equivalent: social psychology’s relative neglect of social systems and structures and the over-psychologised accounts of the social world found in psychoanalysis. As Frosh (2010) has written, ‘For Freud, there often seems to be no “social” at all, only the individual writ large’ (p. 67). With

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that in mind, it is not unreasonable to suggest that – to adapt Paul Stenner’s phrase – the psychosocial marks a point at which psychoanalysis and social psychology ‘reach their limit’ and ‘require revisioning’.

True, as Tom Wengraf and Prue Chamberlayne (2013) argue, psychosocial studies of social phenomena – particularly those above the level of immediate face-to-face interaction – remain under-developed, certainly when compared to studies of the biographical, the interpersonal and of small-scale social settings (pp. 65-73). Nevertheless, the field is, in principle, as interested in medium and large group phenomena and the psychic dimensions of wider social systems and structures, as it is in these other dimensions of social life (see, for example, Hoggett, 2010).

If the psychosocial field can be distinguished by the range of dimensions it seeks to address and by the emphasis it gives to the density and autonomy of both psychic and social life, one further point needs to be made. To think psychosocially is not only to ask how the various dimensions of social and psychic life are ‘intimately connected’ but, as Frosh (2003) went on to say in the second part of the quotation I gave earlier, it is to question if, in some sense, they might in fact be ‘the same thing’ (p. 1547).

What is at stake in that question? To attempt to conceive of the psychic and the social as ‘the same thing’ is to query if our preference for understanding them as always interrelated or mutually constitutive might be as misguided as the idea that they are largely distinct. Perhaps our tendency to think in terms of the psychic, the social and their interrelationship is as much the *outcome* of ways of seeing and knowing conditioned by existing disciplinary formations as it is a property of the objective world? Perhaps the psychic and the social are better thought of as something else – for instance, a single process or multiple processes?

Paul Stenner has articulated that ambition in what is arguably its strongest form (see, for example, Stenner, 2014, 2015; Stenner and Taylor, 2008). As noted earlier, in Stenner’s view psychosocial inquiry is essentially ‘transdisciplinary’. Transdisciplinarity, he explains, implies a strategy or practice that, seizing a particular historical moment in which knowledge claims have become contested, actively seeks out the points at which our various disciplinary understandings of ‘what is’ meet their conceptual limits, are confronted by what they exclude, cease to apply or make sense, transition into something else and so on. Stenner does

not advocate this strategy for its own sake, of course. Instead, its purpose is to allow something new to happen: for us to be able to see and think differently (Stenner, 2015).

Needless to say, those transdisciplinary ambitions may have their limits. If, as Hoggett says, the social world has ‘its own rules of structure formation’, we should be wary of anything that simply collapses the social into the psychic, or vice versa. Similarly, we should be wary of anything that threatens to flatten out possible contradictions and tensions between the psychic and the social (for example, the possibility, that something in what we call psychic life resists or escapes knowledge or social definition). Nevertheless, it seems to me that transdisciplinary ambitions – or something like them – are an important part of the wider psychosocial project and are shared across its different versions.

For instance, although Hoggett’s work is sometimes criticised for reifying the psychic and the social as distinct if interconnected entities, it is evident from his preference for hyphenating the ‘psycho-social’ that he views the hyphen as a ‘third’ space, one that not only connects the psychic and the social even as it separates them but that also transcends the elements from which it is constituted. As Hoggett (2008) writes: ‘Neither psycho, nor social, the hyphen connotes what is “other than” both, that is, what is different from either of the two milieus that generate it’ (p. 384). We do not have to wish away the real differences between Hoggett’s position and those of his critics to read this quotation as an endorsement of the view that psychosocial studies are interested precisely in what more conventional ideas – the psychic, the social and their interrelationship – fail to capture (for critiques of Hoggett see, for instance, Frosh and Baraitser, 2008; Stenner, 2014; Wengraf and Chamberlayne, 2013).

Needless to say, the attempt to think outside disciplinary boundaries and move beyond existing notions of the psychic, the social and their interrelationship is not unprecedented. Alfred Lorenzer’s depth-hermeneutics shared something of the same ambition, for instance (see, in particular his concept of the ‘interaction form’, Bereswill et al., 2010). However, as one of the field’s primary aims, transdisciplinarity can nevertheless be understood as an important and, perhaps, the distinguishing feature of psychosocial inquiry. Together with its attempt to hold in play an unusually wide array of psychic and social phenomena, the psychosocial’s transdisciplinary ambitions help distinguish the field from those contiguous with it. Arguably, they also constitute elements of a ‘shared language’ of precisely the kind Frosh suggested is necessary for a ‘powerful psychosocial perspective’ to emerge.

### **The ‘positive’ and the ‘negative’ in psychosocial studies**

At first glance, the debate between the positive and the negative in psychosocial studies seems to run counter to the emergence of both a shared psychosocial language and a more unified psychosocial perspective. As indicated at the beginning of this article, the debate has proved particularly divisive. Some commentators have argued for a ‘negative’ form of psychosocial inquiry, one that seeks to undo what we believe we know by focusing on what escapes knowledge or with the moments before things take on a definite form or in which they meet their limit and start to change (Frosh, 2007, 2010; Frosh and Baraitser, 2008; Stenner, 2015). In contrast, others have argued for a ‘positive’ form of inquiry, one more comfortable with the idea that psychosocial study can say something definite about a given phenomenon, how it came about and how it might be made better (Day Sclater, et al., 2009). However, as was also suggested at the beginning of this article, a possible route out of this impasse was proposed nearly 20 years ago with Rustin’s (1998) proposal that we adopt a negative practice in a positive structure. I will be exploring this proposal and the extent to which it succeeds in reconciling the negative and the positive emphases in psychosocial studies in what follows. Before doing so, however, it may be useful to remind ourselves why a negative practice is necessary for psychosocial inquiry in the first place.

It goes without saying that psychosocial study involves close attention to the affective, emotional, irrational and unconscious dimensions of subjective and social life. Yet focusing on this subject matter raises a famously awkward problem: how to represent and be knowledgeable about things that escape knowledge and representation (see, for instance, Crociani-Windland, 2009)? That question is raised in a particularly acute form for psychoanalytic versions of psychosocial inquiry since their emphasis on beliefs, feelings and desires that exist outside our conscious awareness implies that we can never entirely trust we know what we are saying or doing. The psychoanalyst, Josh Cohen (2013) puts the point nicely when he writes that, psychoanalytically speaking, ‘we can never simply tell the truth because the truth is not [only, if at all] ours to tell’ (p. 126). Frosh (2010) echoes this point of view, writing, ‘Whenever we believe we know something – even psychoanalysis – we are tripped up uncomfortably by our *wish* to know it’. As he goes on to say, ‘[T]he apparent concreteness of objects and thoughts is undermined by the appalling capacity of unconscious life to seep into [them], to make ... what should be ‘real’ [into] fantasy’ (p. 6).

That ‘appalling capacity of unconscious life’ – the way in which the unconscious always exceeds, contradicts, or undoes what we believe we know or want – leads Frosh to advocate a ‘critical’ or ‘negative’ practice, partly derived from Nobus and Quinn’s (2005) exploration of Lacanian epistemology. Although Frosh does not describe this negative practice in programmatic terms, it seems clear from his comments about it, as well as from his earlier work (for example, Frosh, 2007) that it involves a ‘disintegrative’ or ‘disorganising’ strategy that attempts to open up the object of analysis to multiple interpretations, uncertainty, indeterminacy and the ‘appalling’ ways in which something always escapes or exceeds our ability to know it (see, for instance, Frosh, 2007, 2010, pp. 75-76, 90, 125-126).

Although its point of departure is psychoanalytic, Frosh’s negative practice is not too distant from the transdisciplinary strategies advocated by Stenner (2015) and noted in the previous section. As was suggested, Stenner recommends that, rather than seeking to explain or understand ‘what is’ (i.e. an object of analysis’ positive content), we instead pay attention to those moments in which our explanations and understandings meet their conceptual limits, are confronted by what they exclude, cease to apply or make sense, transition into something else and so on. As with Frosh’s negative practice, such an approach does not aim to generate positive knowledge about psychosocial phenomena but to unsettle what we believe we know and open up understanding to new possibilities and the previously unthought.

Part of what feels compelling about those arguments is their attempt to keep in view the point that knowledge and understanding are always undercut by something they cannot encompass. For psychoanalysis, that ‘something’ is, of course, the unconscious. As Frosh (2010) reminds us, even psychoanalysis has frequently gone ‘astray’ (to use Laplanche’s (2003) term) faced with this, its central insight (pp. 8-12). Psychoanalysis has, for instance, often claimed to be the ‘master discipline’ of the unconscious, rather than, say, a practice bearing witness to the impossibility of the unconscious ever being mastered. The importance of a negative practice, then, lies precisely in its determination to stay close to this insight: to hold fast to the knowledge that something always interrupts our field of vision, escapes our attempt at representation or turns ‘what should be “real” [into] fantasy’.

Such arguments are undoubtedly powerful and remind us of the need to remain alert to what we cannot see or want to avoid. Perhaps we just *want* the psychosocial project to be true? Perhaps there are no better ways of thinking about what we currently call the psychic, the

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social and their interrelationship? It is questions of this kind that make psychoanalysis, in particular, such an unsettling bedfellow for psychosocial studies (see my earlier point). However, as Rustin's (1998) argument implies, the fact that knowledge and understanding are always undercut by something they cannot encompass does not, of necessity, mandate a negative practice and nothing else. As Rustin asks, is it not true that a negative practice can only take place within – indeed, is made possible by – a structure that has a positive content? And doesn't the negative practice give rise to positive content of its own?

In order to unpack those questions, we can turn to a work that in some sense prefigures Rustin's argument: Patrick Casement's (1988/2014) celebrated book, *Learning from the Patient*. As is well known, for Casement, the analyst can attend to the patient's unconscious only to the extent that she is able to refrain from knowing – abandoning 'memory', 'desire' and 'understanding' as Bion's (1967) often repeated formulation has it (although the abandonment of 'understanding' is implied rather explicit in his argument). But, as Casement wrote, in order for the analyst 'not to know' she must be "held" by the structure provided by theory, and by familiarity with [her] own unconscious' (p. 185). In other words, the analyst's ability to engage in a negative practice requires the positive structure that is the body of knowledge transmitted to her in the course of her training as well as her knowledge of her own unconscious gained in her training analysis and supervision. Doubtless this positive structure sometimes fails or intrudes on the negative practice that constitutes the analytic work. When all goes well, however, the positive structure clears a space in which the negative practice of analytic work can occur – a space in which the patient's unconscious can appear and be thought about, however disturbing this may be.

Furthermore, the negative practice of analytic work gives rise to positive content of its own. For the patient, this positive content is likely to be new and will probably include the fact that he is inhabited by someone or something that undoes what he believes he knows. In contrast, for the analyst some of the positive content is likely to be familiar. However, as Casement (1988/2014) explained, if proper analytic work has occurred, such 'already known' knowledge will be a 'rediscovery', something properly alive in the analyst's mind. Moreover, as Casement went on to say, the negative practice of analysis will sometimes not only 'lead' the analyst 'back to what [she] already knows' but also 'further on to what [she] still has to find and understand' (p. 186). In other words, the analyst will continue (or should continue) to learn from each patient she works with. This learning then feeds back into the positive

structure that makes the negative practice of analytic work possible, whether in the form of the analyst's increased capacity to do her own analytic work or, sometimes, as a contribution to psychoanalytic theory or technique.

Psychosocial study is not clinical work, of course and, as has been noted, not all psychosocial researchers are psychoanalytically orientated. Nevertheless, it is arguable that, in some form, psychosocial research parallels what Casement describes. For the psychosocial researcher (see, for instance, Carabine, 2013; Hollway, 2012), a necessarily negative practice (for example, a principled stance of 'not knowing' and a focus on the gaps, scotomas, puzzles, provocations and so on left in the phenomena studied by affect and unconscious processes) is made possible by and gives rise to positive structures (psychosocial knowledge, theory and research methods that, if always provisional and unfinished, are nevertheless meaningful). Moreover, as Frosh (2007) acknowledges, even attempts to eschew positive content and work purely with a negative practice end up reinstating positive knowledge claims, however residual (p. 651). The idea that knowledge and understanding are always undercut by something they cannot encompass is itself a positive knowledge claim, for instance – a fact that underscores the impossibility of stepping outside a positive structure of some kind.

To my mind, those points suggest that Rustin's formulation – a negative practice in a positive structure – offers a promising way to conceive of psychosocial research and a potential resolution to the debate between negative and positive versions of psychosocial studies. Before we embrace the formulation, however, we should perhaps interrogate it a little further. For instance, does its emphasis on a positive structure risk undermining the open-ended nature of negative practices, in the process closing thought down, reinstating disciplinary boundaries and avoiding awareness of the 'appalling capacity of unconscious life' to turn 'what should be "real" [into] fantasy'? Conversely, might its emphasis on negative practices involve an implicit desire not to know something that can in fact be known? More prosaically, is the idea of a negative practice in a positive structure simply a means to sidestep conflict and contradiction in psychosocial debate: an attempt to occupy the 'soggy middle ground' in a manner that, in reality, resolves nothing?

We should certainly be cautious about the illusory comforts offered by false compromises. We should be equally cautious about the tendency for positive structures to get in the way of negative practices and the going 'astray' to which this leads. The degree of certainty



espoused by many psychoanalytic schools of thought provides little ground for optimism about what Casement and Rustin claim to be the virtuous relationship between negative practice and positive structure, for instance. Such certainty surely suggests that negative practices and their capacity to keep thought in motion are all too easily swamped by positive structures. By the same token, it seems evident that the ‘not knowing’ involved in negative practices can sometimes be an attempt to avoid knowing something else – perhaps something painful or unsettling – or can even be an attack on the possibility of knowledge itself.

However, I am not convinced that those possibilities, real as they are, fatally undermine the idea of a negative practice in a positive structure. Perhaps where they leave us is straddling, as best we can, two things in permanent tension. As psychosocial researchers we can hope, like Casement’s analyst, to ‘rediscover’ the known and sometimes to be led to what we ‘still have to find and understand’. However, in order to get there, we have to follow what Laplanche (2003) calls ‘the properly “analytic” vector’ (p. 29) and doing so means that we must approach our objects of study without ‘memory’, ‘desires’ or ‘understanding’. Bion’s injunction is probably over-used and its implications blunted. If we take him at his word, however, those implications are clear: that when undertaking psychosocial work, we *put at risk everything we believe* in order to learn something new. Seen in that light, Rustin’s formulation – a negative practice in a positive structure – seems less an attempt to occupy the soggy middle ground of psychosocial study than a deeply unsettling invitation to participate in a discussion that is inherently open-ended: a psychosocial ‘without guarantees’.

## **Conclusion**

Near the beginning of this article, I quoted Stephen Frosh to the effect that ‘a policy of multiplicity’ for psychosocial studies, even if adopted for the best reasons, runs the risk of ‘creat[ing] its own incoherence’, in the process disrupting the emergence of a ‘shared language’ and thereby preventing the growth of ‘powerful psychosocial perspective[s]’. As will now be apparent, I believe that elements of a shared language are indeed available to us. Among these elements are: the attention studies of the psychosocial pay to an unusually wide range of psychic and social phenomena; the field’s emphasis on the density and relative autonomy of both subjective and social life; its transdisciplinary ambitions; and its commitment to hold in tension the ‘negative’ and the ‘positive’, a commitment that translates into the pursuit of psychosocial knowledge ‘without guarantees’.

Written down in that form, those elements may risk being read as an attempt to impose uniformity on the psychosocial field or as some kind of check-list for ‘proper’ psychosocial research – precisely the kind of exclusionary practices that, elsewhere, Frosh suggested will ‘clos[e] down debate and strangl[e] the possibilities for growth’. With that in mind, let me stress that I do not view the list’s items as either exhaustive or beyond dispute. Some people will want to delete or reformulate individual items. Others will want to define the psychosocial ‘commons’ in wholly other terms. Equally, items could easily be added. An expanded list might include, among others, methodological innovations (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009; Lucey et al., 2003; Froggett and Wengraf, 2004; Lapping, 2011) and an emphasis on affect, emotion, the irrational, unconscious processes and strange and anomalous phenomena. Both have a strong claim to be considered as elements of a shared psychosocial language.

As that suggests, the psychosocial field does not need to be homogeneous or conflict-free. Stenner and Taylor (2008) note that psychosocial research is characterised by distinct ‘dialects’ whose differences give the field a vitality and openness it would otherwise lack (p. 428). Disagreement is productive; oaths of allegiance do not need to be sworn. Nevertheless, I think we do ourselves a disservice if we fail to seek out our common ground or articulate what makes psychosocial study, in all its diversity, different from neighbouring fields of inquiry.

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Peter Redman Once more with feeling: What is the psychosocial anyway?

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