

Introduction to the Special Issue on ‘Sociology and Psychoanalysis’

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Abstract

In this short introduction to the Special Issue on ‘Sociology and Psychoanalysis’ we provide some background information on the conference from which the issue arose, give a brief overview of the issue’s contents and outline the history of the two disciplines’ relationship. We conclude with some thoughts on the ongoing need for a sociology informed by psychoanalysis and a psychoanalysis informed by sociology.

Keywords: sociology; psychoanalysis; the psychosocial

This Special Issue arose from a conference of the same name held at UCL, Institute of Education in London on 11th–12th November 2016.ⁱ As the conference preamble noted, over the years there have been multiple points of contact between sociology and psychoanalysis, among them Freud’s own writings on civilisation, religion and the psychology of groups, the projects of the Freudo-Marxists and the Frankfurt School and, more recently, Lacanian accounts of subjectivity, feminist and queer re-evaluations of sexual difference, and postcolonial critique. But, as the preamble went on to say, despite the productive nature of much of that work and despite the occasional moment in which sociology and psychoanalysis seemed on the brink of a new synthesis, the promise of their relationship has never been entirely fulfilled.ⁱⁱ With that unfulfilled promise firmly in mind, the conference brought together psychoanalytic clinicians and sociologists, both as speakers and audience members. Among the questions it asked were: What can be learned from those earlier, often productive encounters between the two disciplines? How can psychoanalytic ideas and techniques help illuminate sociological enquiry? And what can sociology and psychoanalysis learn from each other today?

In gathering together papers for this Special Issue, we have kept those questions firmly in mind. The issue includes an investigation of how sociological concepts can be enriched by a fuller engagement with psychoanalytic ideas (Matt ffytche’s exploration of the ‘imaginary’ in ‘Real fantasies’); consideration of what psychoanalysis as a clinical practice can learn from sociologies of class (Joanna Ryan’s ‘Class at the nexus of psychoanalysis and sociology’); examination of what sociological research can learn from the clinic (Claudia Lapping and Jason Glynos’s ‘Towards a better understanding of free associative methods as sites of transference in qualitative research’); exploration of how psychoanalytic ideas – in this case, affect – can be applied better to understand a social and political phenomenon (Nikolay

Mintchev and Henrietta Moore's 'Brexit's identity politics and the question of subjectivity'); and reflections on two traditions in which sociology and psychoanalysis have been in close dialogue (Michael Rustin and David Armstrong's 'Psychoanalysis, social science and the Tavistock tradition' and Sasha Roseneil's 'Broader (than psychoanalysis) deeper (than sociology): The psychosocial promise of group analysis'). All but one of those papers (Mintchev and Moore's) were presented in draft form at the conference itself and, to our mind, they convey the ongoing vitality of the conversation between psychoanalysis and sociology.

There is clearly much to celebrate in that conversation. However, it would be difficult to claim that, today, the relationship between the disciplines is close. As many readers of this journal will know, psychoanalysis is a fairly marginal presence in both British and North American sociology. In their article later in this issue, Michael Rustin and David Armstrong reflect on this fact, explaining that – with the notable exception of the work of Norbert Elias – British sociology's early quantitative and empiricist bias prevented psychoanalysis taking root in the discipline as it developed in the UK. Arguably, psychoanalysis's influence on cultural studies and feminism in the 1970s, '80s and '90s meant psychoanalytic ideas were, for a time, in wider circulation. However, they were never fully assimilated by British sociology and, as theoretical debates in cultural studies and feminism moved on, psychoanalysis was once again left on the outside of mainstream sociological discourse.

The relative marginality of psychoanalysis to British sociology today can be judged by the difficulty faced by anyone seeking to publish psychoanalytically informed articles in mainstream sociology journals or give papers at mainstream conferences. Neither is impossible, but the gradient is often uphill.ⁱⁱⁱ As Rustin and Armstrong note, the void left by

this relative indifference has been filled to some extent by psychosocial studies, an interdisciplinary field to which psychoanalysis is central, albeit in ways that are contested (Redman, 2016). Unsurprisingly, psychoanalytically influenced British sociologists often speak at psychosocial or other interdisciplinary conferences and publish in their journal equivalents (it is no coincidence this Special Issue is appearing in *PCS*).^{iv}

In contrast, the influence of psychoanalysis on the Frankfurt School (many of whose luminaries emigrated to the USA during the Nazi era) and its strong presence in Talcott Parsons' (1964) thinking meant that North American sociology had a closer relationship to it, at least for a time (see Chancer and Andrews, 2014; Rustin and Armstrong, in this issue). However, as George Cavelletto and Catherine Silver document in Lynn Chancer and John Andrews' (2014) excellent collection, *The Unhappy Divorce of Psychoanalysis and Sociology*, North American sociology's openness to psychoanalytic ideas declined rapidly during the 1950s. This was despite Talcott Parsons' continuing domination of North American sociology in the post-war years and despite the high profile of others (Cavelletto and Silver cite David Riesman *et al.*, 1953; Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, 1953; and Philip Rieff, 1959) whose work 'incorporated, [though] often in a rather disguised manner, psychoanalytic ideas' (p. 47). What caused that decline? Cavelletto and Silver are unequivocal:

... an institutional and ideological transformation [in sociology] [...] brought with it a positivistic ideology [...] that [...] transformed an unsettled fragmented field of diverse sociological practices into a settled institutional field of greatly constricted practices (the dominant journal style now being "scientific") [...] leading [...] to the dismissal of psychoanalysis as unscientific. (p. 46)

Although, today, North American sociology is far less ‘scientific’ than it was in the past, psychoanalysis never regained its position in the mainstream. As Chancer and Andrews (2014) conclude, ‘[i]t seems fair to say that, in the mainstream of American sociology, psychoanalysis is often seen as outside the field’s primary concerns’ (p. 1).

The relative indifference of British and US sociology to psychoanalysis finds its mirror image in psychoanalysis’ attitude to it. As is well known, despite early interest in sociological questions among a number of leading (mainly Marxist) psychoanalysts – Otto Fenichel (1967), Erich Fromm (1984), Wilhelm Reich (1929/1972) and others^v – psychoanalytic theory and practice developed with little reference to sociological insights. That status quo has never gone unchallenged, of course. As already noted, two traditions in which that challenge has been prominent are examined in this issue (group analysis and work emanating from the Tavistock). Many similar challenges have been explored in the pages of *PCS* over the years (for example, Altman, 2013; Layton, 2014; Malone and Kelly, 2004; Rosa and Mountain, 2013). But despite all of that, it cannot be said that sociological questions have entered the psychoanalytic mainstream. As Nancy Chodorow (2014) has written, reflecting on her dual career as both sociologist and analyst, for the most part psychoanalysis ‘operate[s] as if the social sciences [do] not exist’ (p. 136). Joanna Ryan revisits Chodorow’s account in her contribution later in this issue. Summarising Chodorow’s argument, she writes, ‘Chodorow [...] contrasts the extensive interest of psychoanalysts in the arts and humanities with its [lack of] [...] interest in the social sciences or how social forces might inflect the dynamics of the consulting room.’ And, as Ryan goes on to say, Chodorow notes

the glacial speed with which new ideas and theorising arising from social movements or critiques find any place within psychoanalysis, something especially evident in the

long contestations around the place of homosexuality within psychoanalytic theory, practice and trainings.

Why does any of this matter? Why should two very different disciplinary formations – one clinical and focused on individual psychic life, one academic and focused on understanding the functioning of social worlds – be in close dialogue? Frequent readers of this journal will have their own answers, but, for the record, here is our own.

First, sociology – for all its emphasis on social structures and other processes that operate independently of individuals' intentions or control – needs an account of subjectivity. Social worlds may have emergent properties that cannot be reduced to the individuals who participate in them, but they are nevertheless dependent on and, in important ways, made and remade by individuals (and things) in interaction. Sociology's account of subjectivity has always tended, in Dennis Wrong's (1961) famous phrase, to be 'over-socialised' – a rather one-dimensional and 'thin' account that views people's inner lives as little more than reflections of available social conventions and constraints. As is often noted, not least by Chodorow (2014) in the autobiographical piece mentioned above (see pp. 128–130), the richly layered accounts of subjectivity present in the different versions of psychoanalysis offer a powerful corrective to this view. For psychoanalysis, the subject is always decentred by unconscious processes, and subjective experience shot through with unconscious fantasy and drives. These phenomena help explain why people, often repetitively and at considerable cost to themselves and those around them, make powerful emotional investments in things – including social and political beliefs and practices – not always in their best interests. By the same token, they also help explain why people are never fully colonised by the social worlds they inhabit.

Over and above its account of subjectivity, psychoanalysis also speaks to those dimensions of social life that appear to be irrational and at least partially unconscious. Outbreaks of inter-communal violence, resurgent right-wing populism, a collective inability to come to terms with the legacies of colonialism and enslavement, societal lethargy in the face of unfolding climate catastrophe – all of these and more seem to involve irrational and potentially unconscious processes that are *collective* in character. In one view, these irrational and unconscious dimensions should be seen as individual processes operating in parallel – that is, properties of individuals or of intersubjective relations embedded in interpersonal processes (see, for example, Alford, 1989, pp. 57–58). This is surely the case, for some of the time at least. However, there exists a tantalising possibility they can also be understood in terms that are more fully sociological – as properties of particular aspects of the social formation that are irreducible to the individuals from which they are composed.

In their article later in this special issue, Rustin and Armstrong indicate one route by which that possibility can be investigated: the social systems as defences against anxiety model first developed in the work of Elliott Jaques (1953/1990) and Isobel Menzies Lyth (1960/1990) in the 1950s. Another is to be found in the growing literature on the social unconscious emerging from group analysis (Hopper and Weinberg, 2011, 2016, 2017). However, as those references indicate, the closer we come to questions concerning social structures and collective social life the more we are likely to need resources in addition to those made available by psychoanalysis in its familiar forms, focused as these are on intrapsychic and interpersonal processes. As suggested by Rustin and Armstrong's article and Roseneil's field note in this issue, the group relations and group analytic traditions are obvious places in which those resources can be sought. They are by no means the only ones, however.

Resources can also be found in, among others, the depth hermeneutic tradition associated with the work of Alfred Lorenzer (1986), Bereswill *et al.* (2010) and Vamik Volkan's (2004) work on large group processes; Lacanian studies (for example, Hook, 2012); and Kelly Oliver's (2004) psychoanalytic social theory of oppression.

What of psychoanalysis? Why does it need sociology? As Roseneil comments, in her field note in this issue, for some,

[m]atters societal have no legitimate place in the consulting room. When they appear they are to be understood as distractions or defences, detracting from the real business of attending to the individual psyche and its maladies.

Needless to say, 'matters societal' can and do appear as distractions or defences, whether introduced by the patient or, for that matter, by the analyst. Moreover, any psychoanalysis worth its salt will have, close to its heart, the fundamental insight that the mind is its own place. Susan Isaacs (1948) put that point as eloquently as anyone when she wrote:

...the inner world of the mind has a continuous living reality of its own, with its own dynamic laws and characteristics, different from those of the external world. In order to understand the dream and the dreamer, his psychological history, his neurotic symptoms or his normal interests and character, we have to give up that prejudice in favour of external reality, and of our conscious orientations to it, that under-valuation of internal reality, which is the attitude of the ego in Western civilized life to-day. (p. 80)

If the mind is its own place, then the ‘external’ world can never appear in the ‘internal’ in unmediated fashion. Social reality is always filtered through unconscious fantasy and inflected by object relations and the drives. Indeed, the ‘external’ has to be put in quotation marks precisely because what is subjectively experienced as belonging to it can have as much, if not more, to do with unconscious fantasy as with conditions as they exist in the outside. More than that, through projective identification, the ‘external’ world can actively include what might otherwise be thought of as ‘internal’.

But, as is surely obvious, that insight – crucial though it is to psychoanalytic ideas and clinical practice – does not mean social reality is absent from the ‘internal’ world of the psyche or irrelevant to clinical work. The ‘internal’ requires its quotation marks quite as much as the ‘external’: unconscious fantasy, internal objects and the drives develop within and are inflected by interpersonal relations (primarily those of the family) which are, in turn, embedded within and inflected by wider social relations, constraints and inequalities. As Roseneil, quoting the celebrated psycho- and group analyst S.H. Foulkes, writes: ‘we cannot make the conventional sharp differentiation between inside and outside, or between phantasy and reality. What is inside is always also outside, what is outside is inside as well’ (Foulkes, 1974, quoted by Roseneil, in this issue). That does not imply the analyst can know in advance what a given social experience will mean in a patient’s ‘internal’ life or how it will play out in the course of their work together. But it does imply that social realities mean *something* and are liable to appear and require exploration.

Joanna Ryan’s article in this issue explores some of the consequences that arise when we fail to attend to how those realities impinge on the clinical encounter. As she documents, her paper contributes to a growing literature examining how the social world manifests in clinical

work (see, for example, Altman, 2010; Davids, 2011; Gherovici and Christian, 2018; Layton *et al.*, 2006). However, much remains to be done in this area, not least in psychoanalytic training, which too often fails to prepare candidates to address or even recognise how the social plays out in the clinic (Layton, 2016).

If that discussion indicates why, from our point of view, psychoanalysis needs sociology as much as sociology needs psychoanalysis, one final point remains to be made. A fuller dialogue between the two disciplines should aim at something more than enriching their existing ways of understanding. It seems possible that, pushed far enough, such a dialogue would transform at least some of their objects of knowledge and, in the process, challenge their disciplinary boundaries. This is not to suggest that, as a clinically orientated discipline, psychoanalysis can or should be collapsed into one orientated to the academic study of societies – or vice versa. It is to imply that something might be gained from troubling those boundaries and opening ourselves to the possibility that our objects of knowledge can be systematically rethought. Claims of that kind are easily made, less easily accomplished; indeed, the history of sociological-psychoanalytic conversations is littered with stalled attempts and false starts. Nevertheless, if the long unfulfilled promise of the disciplines' relationship is to be made good, they are goals at which we should be aiming.

Endnotes

ⁱThe conference was co-organised by the Institute of Psychoanalysis, the British Sociological Association's Study Group on 'Sociology, Psychoanalysis and the Psychosocial' and the

Department of Culture, Communication and Media, UCL, Institute of Education. It was sponsored by the Independent Social Research Foundation, together with the Institute of Advanced Study and The Social Theory Centre, both at The University of Warwick.

ⁱⁱ The conference subtitle was ‘The unfulfilled promise’. We borrowed this from Fred Weinstein’s (2000) *Freud, Psychoanalysis, Social Theory: The Unfulfilled Promise*.

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, papers submitted to the British Sociological Association’s annual conference by members of the Sociology, Psychoanalysis and the Psychosocial Study Group are allocated to the ‘Frontiers’ stream, which is designated for ‘experimental’ work and research that does not otherwise fit the Association’s core activities. An example of a recent mainstream journal publication which included a psychoanalytic presence was the ‘Habitus: Special Section’ in *Sociological Review* 64(1), (2016), pp. 64–201.

^{iv} For the UK-based Association for Psychosocial Studies, see: <http://www.psychosocial-studies-association.org>.

^v Although not published until 1967, Fenichel’s paper is believed to have been written in the 1940s. Fromm’s German workers study was written in the 1930s, but not published until the 1980s.

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