10: Psycho-social Research

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When Valerie Walkerdine was founding critical psychology through setting up the Centre for Critical Psychology at the University of Western Sydney and launching this journal, she defined critical psychology thus:

> Critical psychology is an umbrella term used to describe a growing and diverse field of discursive and psycho-social approaches to the inter disciplinary study of human subjectivity…[T]heorising and researching subjectivity is a central issue for critical psychology (The Centre for Critical Psychology, launch document, 2000).

The following six articles all exemplify ways of doing empirical research on subjectivity informed by a psycho-social approach. This approach of course affects research questions and how human subjectivity is conceptualised. However, this special issue has a different focus. It explores two further implications of a psycho-social perspective on human subjectivity in research; two aspects of method and how they bear on each other. First, what methods are adequate to researching psycho-social subjectivity and what difference do they make to the knowledge that we produce? Second how do we put into effect a psycho-social understanding of our own subjectivity as researchers to explore, for example, the implications for critical psychology's concern for ethics within power relations? The three books reviewed in this issue also explore the implications of a psycho-social approach, in particular for theorisation of subjectivity.

The six special issue contributions demonstrate diversity in provenance, topic, method and way of conceptualising the psycho-social that testifies to an extensive and dynamic empirical research tradition in critical psychology. The six pieces are from five different countries (Australia, South Africa, Sweden, UK and USA). They exemplify a variety of methods. Face-to-face interviewing is the most common method (David Jones; Talia Soskolne, Joanne Stein and Kerry Gibson; Annie Stopford; Lynn Froggett and Tom Wengraf) but it is approached with variations; for example turning it into a dialogue, 'an approach similar to the co-construction of meaning by analyst and patient during analytic sessions' (Stopford). Froggett and Wengraf illustrate the biographical narrative interpretative method, in particular the very systematic procedure for data analysis that is practised in the BNIM. Lynne Layton conducts a 'very informal survey', by email, of her 'friends' and colleagues'' emotional experiences when shopping. Gunilla Halldén's method involves analysing fictional stories written by school children about a future family life. In this way she traces the identificatory movement of the 'I' in the story, untrammelled by the requirement to speak about real experiences, and considers its relation to the 'I' of the writer. Halldèn, Froggett and Wengraf and Jones all draw on the idea of a narrative subject in different ways. Finally, Ian Parker's article on discursive practice, although it is not included in the special issue section because it was not written to address the theme and specification, uses data drawn from the correspondence he had with an editor of a critical psychology text in the process of revising a chapter for publication, a text which he then deconstructs.

Different methods, different topics and also different participant groups: African Australians and non-African Australians in the post-colonial contact zone of heterosexual relationships (Stopford), professional New Yorkers with different class and ethnic backgrounds reflecting on their emotional reactions in high-end and low-end shopping outlets (Layton), a nine-year-old Swedish schoolgirl writing a fictional account of a future family life (Halldén), a twenty six–year old British Asian woman community worker giving a biographical account of her life and entry into the community centre where she works (Froggett and Wengraf), a group of women from a poor South African township talking about living with an HIV–positive identity (Soskolne, Stein and Gibson), the experiences of family members of white and black British young men suffering from a mental illness (Jones).

Not surprisingly given the depth of analysis required by a psycho-social approach, there is a tendency towards small numbers, often single cases. I am happy to say that none of the authors apologise for

this. Perhaps we have now shaken off the positivist mentality that specifies that only statistical sampling and analysis permits generalisation and therefore has any reach. The extrapolations from these data, linked as they are to their theoretical frameworks, have plenty of reach

The ongoing, now fairly familiar, challenge to a critical psychology of subjectivities in the research process is how we treat data in a way consistent with a psycho-social view of subjectivity. This means avoiding producing data interpretations that are dualistically intra-psychic or social, rather than something that genuinely articulates the hinge or hyphen. The hyphen in psycho-social is important: it means that where ever you encounter the social, you encounter it multiply mediated by the psychodynamic and vice versa:

> We are *psycho*-social because we are products of a unique biography of anxiety- and desire-provoking life events and the manner in which their meanings have been unconsciously transformed in internal reality. We are psycho-*social* because such defensive activities affect and are affected by discourses and also because the unconscious defences that we describe are intersubjective processes (that is, they affect and are affected by others). We are psycho-social because the real events in the external, social world are desirously and defensively, as well as discursively, appropriated[1].

With regard to the way the articles attempt a psycho-social approach, there are commonalities and also differences. All the six articles have in common that they draw on some kind of psychoanalytic perspective in understanding the psycho-social. They all 'move beyond approaches which view subjectivity as "the sum total of positions in discourse since birth" (Walkerdine, op. cit.). Layton, for example, argues that 'emotions such as the "heebie jeebies" play an important role in sustaining the tastes that keep class hierarchies in place'. She shows that such 'core sociological concepts operate largely on an unconscious level'. Soskolne, Stein and Gibson are faced with the realisation, well after the start of their interviews with HIV positive South African women, that the positions that the women were taking up in a positive identity discourse about their HIV status was not the whole story. The painful side was harder for them to articulate and also harder for the researchers to hear. Jones started off researching stigma ('the outward mark of difference') and found that people's difficulties in talking about the stigma associated with having a family member suffering from mental illness pointed to the effect of stigma – shame. (Interestingly, the exploration of shame arises not just in Jones and Soskolne et al, but also in Layton and Stopford.) Froggett and Wengraf want to use psychoanalysis to 'understand the processes by which the external world is internalised and represented' and they apply this focus to the experience of generational relations in both a Community Centre that they are studying and their own research team: 'the social relations within the Centre are represented in the inner worlds of individuals and are partly configured by psychodynamic processes between them'. Halldén shows the movement of nine-year-old Ditte's gendered and generational identifications through her imaginary family.

More specific, but very important, is how we understand, and put into practice, the implications of our own subjectivity as researchers, how we understand the power relations into which we are inserted, our myriad effects on the knowledge we produce, and how we negotiate, in our own practice, between the Scylla of imagined neutrality and the Charybdis of distorting our knowledge products. Authors' ways of positioning themselves in their research and its effects are, for me, the most exciting aspect of this whole project, going way beyond the rather mechanistic operationalisation of reflexivity in qualitative social science in terms of the main, socially-given social identities.

The authors achieve this in different ways, some individual and some group-based. Froggett and Wengraf, for example, show that 'sufficiently variegated panels liberate the defensive researcher by enabling new thoughts and ideas to enter a relatively closed world'. In their view, a 'panel works by multiple micro-identifications with the unknown interviewee'. When someone else's speculation comes in, or the next chunk of transcript is revealed, (a feature of this method is that the interpretation panel are not acquainted with the whole transcript in advance of each chunk being revealed), 'a process of misidentification occurs and individual panel members recognise that they were in the grip of a "belief" which they can now evaluate from the outside'. Froggett and Wengraf use the ideas of triangular mental space and self-aware reflexivity to conceptualise this panel procedure. Jones, struck by how it was 'unusual (I think unique) for me to get into a confrontation with people I was interviewing', came

to the conclusion that his interviewee, the mother of a son suffering from mental illness, was 'acting out something regarding her relation to her son and the outside world'. He 'became part of the hostile world that she thinks cannot understand and care for her son'. He considers the idea of projective identification to be useful in this context. Layton was introduced to the idea for her piece of research when she noticed the different emotional responses of her and her friend in the low-end store they were visiting. She incorporated this bit of self-awareness into the information she sent out to her respondents. She tells them in the email: 'I myself experience shame when I'm in places like Neiman Marcus, like I'm going to make some terrible faux pas and I'll be discovered not to belong'…'what do those emotions have to do with class? Do you have any anecdotes you'd be willing to share?' In effect Layton is treating herself as one – the first – of her participants and posing more or less the same research question to the others as she has formulated for herself (minus Bourdieu's references to taste). Her grasp of her own class position and ethnicity enable her to think through some differences in her group of respondents and notice, for example, the significance of whether someone has always been a member of an upper-middle-class fraction, or has arrived there from petit-bourgeois or working-class origins.

Stopford, also an example of the group she was studying, shows how her own subjectivity is 'an important part of the construction of knowledge'. In the context of some striking similarities between her and a woman interviewee, she comments 'I was aware at this point in our conversation that I had a fleeting internal critical response that was so strong that I almost voiced my surprise and disapproval'. She 'contained the urge to speak, made a mental note to reflect later on what was going on for me' and was able to use this to recognise a need to dissociate from one of the interviewee's specific positions. If unrecognised this need would have made her unable to understand how that part of the interviewee's talk fitted in with the wider narrative. While drawing from her practice as a relational psychoanalytic therapist, Stopford balances this with principles of dialoguing with her interviewees, both during and after the meeting. She does this because of the 'ethical and epistemological problems in transposition from clinical psychoanalysis to research'. 'In the research context, where we have extremely brief contact with research participants… it is arguably even more imperative that psychoanalytically inclined researchers try to devise methods which facilitate our participants' involvement in construction of interpretation'.

One of the most difficult theoretical issues that confront psycho-social empirical research is how we as researchers treat the status of the knowledge that we deal with. The dominant contemporary position in critical psychology is to stress the impossibility of knowing reality. 'Truth' comes in scare quotes and is theorised, following Foucault, as a product of power-knowledge relations. Building on this critically, I want to trace what I would call a critical realist psycho-social position, using as an example the multiple and mediated realities of the HIV positive South African women whose interviews feature in this issue (Soskolne, Stein and Gibson).

For most HIV positive people in South Africa, the reality is that they are likely to die of AIDS. Anti-retrovirals, such as these women are taking, can hold the sickness at bay. These are two of the external realities that bear upon the women's accounts and it is in the light of these that the researchers make sense of their accounts. An external reality of a different kind is that of the stigmatisation of people with HIV/AIDS, different because, being social it is more malleable, and subject to challenge as is happening through the positive identity movement. The researchers have a different access to these external realities, partly because of their educational status and access to global information, partly because they are not (as far as I know) HIV positive themselves. The interviewees' internal reality is probably rather different, a product of the conflicts created by their condition. These conflicts are real enough (for example the wish, in the face of social stigma, to withdraw from and also to pursue intimate social relationships). In the face of mental conflict (the more acute, the more unbearable and the more active the defences), unconscious dynamic processes can help towards coping. For example the take-up of a new position in the positive identity discourse can help them (along with the availability of anti-retrovirals) to ignore the more painful realities. These new positions are both socially and psychically mediated. Likewise, before the availability of the new positive identity discourse, the cultural silence about AIDS was dovetailed with individuals' tendencies to deny their own HIV positive status because of how unbearably painful it would have been to think about the mortal consequences and to expose oneself to the social stigma. This tendency produced and reproduced the cultural silence, which, in turn produced and reproduced the likelihood of denial. This is a psycho-social dynamic. In post structuralist theory, given its weakness in theorising agency, it is often debated what is the impetus for discourses to be challenged and overtaken. In this example, there

remain realities (as above) resisted by both the old, stigmatising and the new positive discourse; realities which eventually cannot be suppressed. At the same time, the reality of AIDS continues to be multiply mediated, by discourses and practices, and by psychic processes such as denial.

Soskolne, Stein and Gibson comment how the researchers were at first carried along with their interviewees' positive accounts of their HIV status. However, if we view this discourse psycho-socially, we will look also for what is left out (which can only be achieved using some other foothold on reality), for example what is split off. The researchers then experienced strong reaction: 'some of us held fiercely onto the idea of the women as strong and capable ... Others felt that we were underestimating their vulnerability'. The researchers' different positions among their group (as in Froggett and Wengraf's example) with regard to participants' accounts of their HIV positive status eventually gave them some purchase on its negative aspects. However their own investments in the positive identity discourse, coupled with their identifications with the women interviewees, made it difficult to think about what must have felt almost unbearable: 'It was only with some reflection that we were able to recognise in our responses to the material some of the fluctuation between disparate feelings of hope and despair, courage and fragility, that the women themselves must experience'. The researchers' stance required identification but not loss of differentiation. Differentiation makes available different perspectives (more objective in the specific sense that it is not their own reality which is so painful in this context), from which position the significance of the interviewees' embrace of a positive discourse can be grasped. This requires self-critical reflexivity amongst the researchers (aided by the differences amongst the research group).

If the researchers had not faced their own defensive and wishful attachment to the positive identity discourse, the reports and academic outputs from their project would have reproduced and fortified that discourse at the expense of a more ambivalent reality. My conclusion from this is two-fold. First, as psycho-social researchers, we should understand discourses, like the positive identity discourse in this example, not as 'social' products that interact with individual psyches, but as products that are always already 'psycho-social'; forged out of the realities and cultural meanings that are already mediated by anxiety and desire. Likewise, the inner worlds of these women are always already psycho-social in the sense that their anxieties and desires already have a biography of being expressed through meanings. This is what I mean by saying that the hyphen in psycho-social is important. Second, as researchers we have ways of evaluating knowledge claims, not because we have unmediated access to reality, but because we can avail ourselves of sufficiently multiple perspectives on realities (which I have tried briefly to specify in the above example), that is, it becomes possible to recognise the distortions and partialities that characterise our own, our research colleagues' and our participants' psycho-social efforts after authentic meaning.

The methods we use as researchers affect the knowledge we produce, most importantly the idea of human subjectivity that our research contributes to. My reason for embracing critical psychology was that I found psychology's methods of producing knowledge shockingly reductive and distorting. This special issue therefore has focussed on different methods and exemplified the different knowledge they produce.

Endnote:
1. Adapted from W. Hollway and T. Jefferson (2000), *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: Free Association, Narrative and the Interview Method*, p24, London: Sage Publications.