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## Psychosocial Methodologies;

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The chapter will provide an introduction to how psychosocial concepts are used to inform the design and planning of psychosocial research methods. Psychosocial Studies emerged as a distinct field of enquiry in response to awareness of the need to repair the damaging schism that had developed between what might broadly be called sociological and psychological forms of knowledge. The assumption that there is a division between the social and psychological realms leaves us unable to grasp the reciprocal relationships between the affective and agentic elements of the individual psyche and the social and cultural structures that surround us.

The chapter will begin with a brief introduction to some of the problems that endeavours in psychosocial studies are trying to solve and some of the conceptual tools that have been used. For reasons that will become clear, reflective practices are often central to the efforts of psychosocial exploration and so the chapter will proceed initially via reflection on the development of the author's own work that will be used to introduce the method of interviewing that has been most associated with psychosocial studies. The chapter will then move on to examine observational methods that have also been carried out with distinct psychosocial sensibilities. Finally, there will be a shift to looking at more recent developments that are aimed at exploring the psychosocial domain that exists at the level of the group or community. Here the notion of the matrix has been an important concept.

Psychosocial methods are particularly suitable for studying sensitive topics where people might struggle to articulate some of the most important issues. Like most qualitative studies, they tend to

be used for in-depth studies involving relatively small numbers of participants. Questions of the sampling, reliability and generalisability of findings are not discussed within the chapter but the same principles that are applied to other small samples can be applied here.

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## 1. Conceptual Issues: the long history of psychosocial thinking

Whilst the institutional life of psychosocial studies can be tracked in the UK since the 1990s, it has longer and more extensive roots than this. There is global interest (Frost and Jones 2019) with notable interest in Scandinavia (Andersen and Dybbroe 2020) and the USA (Bowker and McIvor 2020). The need for psychosocial thinking was created by the schism between the sociological and psychological understandings of the human world that emerged through the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the ‘founding fathers’ laid down the shape of the disciplines. Whilst there have been those whose work did transcend boundaries (notably Du Bois, 1899, 1903 for example) such work remained relatively marginal and the hard distinction made between the social and psychological realms still had a huge impact on the development of the disciplines. Sociological analyses have tended to assume there is little of interest within the individual. Despite moves to accept the social significance of subjectivity, agency and indeed the personal life (Roseneil 2006), it can still be claimed that the ‘social sciences’ have struggled to incorporate the worlds of emotions as being important dimensions of enquiry (Rustin 2009). Meanwhile, the persistent allegiance of mainstream schools of psychological thought to experimental methodologies, alongside the tendency to reduce the complexity of the social world to a few selected variables has been the more substantial obstacle to integration (Frosh 2003). It has been psychoanalytic modes of enquiry, largely eschewing experimental methods, that have offered some possibility of integration with sociological and cultural forms of enquiry (Frost and Jones 2019). Thus, whilst psychoanalytic ideas are not necessarily a required ingredient of psychosocial methods, they have often been central to debate about the development of psychosocial methodologies. Whilst the use of psychoanalysis has not been without controversy (Wetherell 2005), it can also be

argued that too narrow a focus on the interview encounter could be seen as antithetical to the commitment to understand the interaction of wider social and cultural factors. As will be demonstrated in this chapter, methods that engage directly with this wider social context, and acknowledge the field's commitment to transdisciplinarity are being increasingly used.

Significant landmarks in the establishment of psychosocial thinking occurred around the period of the second world war in Britain, through the influence and use of particular strains of psychoanalysis, and in Germany through the efforts of what became known as the Frankfurt School (Jay 1973). Two connected elements of thinking were crucial to the latter. Firstly, there was the creation of 'critical theory' which asked not only that the theory and practice of research be used to question power structures but theoretical and methodological questions could never be separated from the social conditions that produced them (Horkheimer 1972). There was therefore no such thing as an objective stance, meaning the production of all knowledge had to be subject to reflexive awareness. Secondly, this was coupled with a turn towards psychoanalysis as it appeared that the work of Freud could provide some insight into the otherwise puzzling commitment of many people to the social systems that were treating them rather poorly. This work, initially led by Erich Fromm in the 1930s, was fuelled by the observation that the financial hardships that followed the first world war and global financial depression were leading many Germans towards the embrace of fascism rather than a socialist overthrow of the capitalist system (McLaughlin 2019). Whilst Fromm's early work was based on interviews with German citizens in the early 1930s, it later became a more theoretical analysis of the potential allure of authoritarianism to those in western democracies (eg, Fromm 1942). Whilst perhaps the most widely known work to emerge from the Frankfurt School is that by Adorno and colleagues (Adorno et al. 1950) as they explored the idea and roots of the 'authoritarian personality', the influence of the group has been considerable (Jay 1973). In the UK, the second world war also saw the fermentation of a psychosocial tradition in the work of the 'Institute for the Study of Delinquency' and the Tavistock Clinic that witnessed interest in harnessing psychoanalytic ideas (largely influenced by theories of object relations<sup>i</sup>) to progressive political goals (Shapira 2013). There was also the related emergence of practices and theories of community and group therapies that were fostered within military psychiatry (Harrison 2000). As we will see in the section on 'Psychosocial Methods and Groups', experiments in group therapies have more recently inspired methodological innovations that assume that the focus of study should be on the group, or the matrix that is assumed to connect the feelings of thoughts of individuals in a group. By the 1990s a number of universities were following the University of East London in instituting degree programmes in 'psychosocial studies' (Walkerdine 2008), eventually achieving sufficient momentum to establish the *Association for Psychosocial Studies* with the founding belief that:

Psychological issues and subjective experiences cannot be abstracted from societal, cultural, and historical contexts; nor can they be deterministically reduced to the social. Similarly, social and cultural worlds are shaped by psychological processes and intersubjective relations. (APS 2020)

Two related issues flow from this that inform the design of studies using psychosocial methods. There is a commitment to understanding the intimate world of interiority and emotion that requires the tools to access this world 'within' the individual alongside the commitment to understand the continuity of the emotional world of the individual with the social and cultural landscape. These parameters have often been expressed in terms of a commitment to a binocular sensibility, as Brown (2009: 153) explains her understanding of psychosocial research as requiring 'binocular vision' that asks that the researcher should 'zoom in on the micro (personal, familiar histories, self/other experiences, self narratives etc.) and pan out to the macro (socio-historical structures, sociocultural discourses'. The rather different metaphor of the moebius strip has also been utilised to express the impossibility of separating out analyses that operate at social and psychological levels; tracing the interior side of the strip always leads to the exterior (eg, Frosh and Baraitser 2008).

Figure 1. Moebius strip

## 2. Reflection: A Personal Journey

My engagement with psychosocial methodologies began when I was studying for my PhD and as others have reported (Hoggett 2014) I found myself working in the field of psychosocial studies before I knew that there was such a place. Soon after graduating from university with a degree in psychology I began working within a psychiatric research project (Leff et al 2000) that became the inspiration for a doctoral project that aimed to understand the impact that serious mental health problems might have on families. The serious mental health problems experienced by my mother, had quite consciously drawn me to study psychology, the PhD focus on families was perhaps a less conscious move. My family experiences perhaps played a role as I found that that involvement with research like this was to draw me into a world of feelings that were difficult to accommodate in the research models that were dominating in social science, and particularly psychology. Too many of the nuanced, complex and contradictory thoughts and feelings of the participants could not be captured by the quantitative methods favoured by the main project. It was clear that some of the

qualitative methods used on different parts of the study were more successful at including capturing the significance of the environment and personal interactions (eg, Tomlinson 1991), but even the qualitative methods that were favoured within sociology did not seem to be able to quite engage with the nuanced and often contradictory worlds of feelings that I was having to work with. Whilst there was growing interest in the sociology of emotions, there has been some dispute about how well sociological methods were able to capture the nuance of affect that might only exist within the interior (as captured by the debate between Craib (1995) and Williams and Bendelow 1996). Meanwhile working in a National Health Service Psychotherapy Department, taking initial steps towards what I thought might be a career in psychotherapy, introduced me to psychoanalytically informed work with clients. It became obvious that I needed to amalgamate this different and deeper way of listening to people with the promise of qualitative sociological analysis that could take in the wider social context.

Within this simple story are the threads of important strands of psychosocial thought that inform the planning of psychosocial investigation. The need for methods that can appreciate the complex interior worlds of the individual alongside the importance of social context. It was not only the realities of social policy initiatives that shaped people's lives, but as was being increasingly emphasised by scholars working in the wake of Foucault's writing on the importance of a historical understanding of constructions on subjectivity (in the area of psychiatry in particular; Foucault 1967) so was an understanding of history. The architecture and concepts of the asylums seemed to be entwined in the fabric of the contemporary mental health system. A grasp of the history and sociology of psychiatry seemed essential to understanding how we 'now' conceptualised, thought and felt about issues of mental health and illness.

### 3. Methods

The following sections present examples of a number of methods that can be used to plan studies that take psychosocial perspectives seriously. We begin with the psychosocial interview and the idea of 'binocular vision', before moving to observational techniques, and then to methods that aim to capture psychosocial processes that work at the level of the group and the community.

## Interviewing

We will begin by looking at the psychosocial interview as this has been viewed as characteristic of a psychosocial methodology, it is the method that most clearly utilises principles from psychoanalysis and perhaps because of that it is also the method that has created most debate and controversy (Frosh and Baraitser 2010, Wetherell 2005).

In order to understand the experiences of people who had a relative suffer from serious mental health issues I carried out in-depth interviews with people, usually the parents or siblings of someone who had been hospitalised for at least 6 months, with a serious mental health diagnosis. The interviews were generally between 45 and 90 minutes, and were mostly one-off interviews although some were repeated (Jones 2002).

The interviews employed a number of techniques that were influenced by the psychoanalytic concept of free association (Sandler, Dare and Holder, 1973), but in this research context were better called 'the assumption of association' (Jones, 1998). The supposition was that the language people use and the connections that people made between topics could be taken as indicating something of the meaning and emotional significance of experiences for people in ways that they may not themselves be able to express. This entailed paying particular attention to what people brought spontaneously to the interview; what words and thoughts are associated together; or what tone, facial expression, or posture is used that may suggest an addition or even an alternative to the overtly intended meaning.

In recognition of the importance of what the interviewee brings to the encounter, a very open question was used to begin: 'When did things seem to go wrong?' It seemed reasonable to imagine it would be believed that something had gone wrong given the nature of the sample. The question made no assumptions about the time frame or what the nature of the problem might be – but these matters were left to the interviewee. The interviews then proceeded as much as possible through me asking as few questions that changed the topic as possible. Instead I prompted and encouraged people to talk. I would particularly encourage people to say more about what they thought and felt about the events they were describing. It would have been easy to have had conversations simply about the identified ill person. Whilst this was inevitable to an extent, I was interested in the impact on the family member I was interviewing.

It is also assumed that the communication of emotional states would be likely to take place not only through words but would also be communicated through the relationship in the room. This meant

that I had to monitor my own emotional reactions during interviews and reflect upon them afterwards. Such monitoring has been referred to, as reflexivity in social research (Kleinman and Copp, 1993) or as counter-transference in the psychoanalytic literature. Counter-transference, in a clinical context, can broadly be defined as the experiences of the analyst that occur in the presence of the patient. The meaning and significance of counter-transference, initially understood as the unwanted intrusion of the analysts feelings and therefore a potential distortion of communication, has come to be viewed as a highly significant channel of communication and source of insight (Heimann 1950). Its use has developed and refined particularly by the British school of object relations (Kohon, 1986; Raynor, 1991).

#### The analysis: the emergence of shame

The process of the analysis of the interview material could be divided into two stages. Certain discrete topics such as people's views on specific topics such as medication, for example, were initially explored through a systematic process. All mentions of the topic were gathered together. All extracts could then be compared and themes developed from them rather in the manner of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Other issues, however, emerged from what could be better understood as a reflective integrative analysis where no meaningful distinction could be made between the process of data collection and data analysis. Instead, the interviews and their analysis were part of an iterative process that involved listening to and transcribing the interviews, reflecting on their meaning and the feelings invoked that would spur further reading in particular directions, all of which would then feed into the subsequent interviews.

In order to illustrate the importance of this aspect of the method and the benefit of psychosocial enquiry, I will describe how the significance of shame emerged in the study. Shame, usually a hidden feeling, one that is difficult for people to talk about and discuss, emerged in this study through my attempt to explore the impact of stigma. At the outset, this seemed to be an obvious line of enquiry as the association of stigma with issues of mental health was already well established (eg Scheff 1963) and likely to be of significance to the families. It was therefore one of the topics that I wanted to discuss during the interviews. The interviews were generally free flowing as people were largely keen to talk, there was a sense that most families were pleased to have the opportunity to talk and most had strong feelings about the difficulties that they and their relative had faced. I found however that stigma was the topic that did not tend to arise spontaneously during the interviews. Instead I found that I would have to raise this myself. It was in one of the later

interviews, with Mrs Land who was in her late 50s and mother to a man in his late 20s who had been in and out of hospital with severe mental health problems since his later teens, that the full significance of this began to reveal itself. It was through analysis of my own reactions during the interview with Mrs Land that I was led to an understanding of the powerful impact of shame. I argue here that shame was manifest during the interview itself, so that dialogue at times was severely limited. It was only through reflecting on the disruption in the interview itself that this could be thought about.

By this stage in the research process I was aware that I had to bring up the question of stigma. When I first tried to broach the subject through a simple question about whether she feels able to talk to others, the dialogue between us quickly became attenuated, I ask rather short blunt question and Mrs Land denies the need to talk to other people besides her family:

DJ: Do you feel able to talk about Brian, to either friends, colleagues ...

ML: Only my sister ...

DJ: You don't talk to other people?

ML: No...

DJ: Why is that?

ML: ... I don't have any friends ... I only have my colleagues here at work, because I involve myself in my family. I find contentment with my family. I don't need to go out and find someone to talk to because I involve myself with my family . . .

A little later on in the interview I pushed the point about her perhaps feeling that stigma has affected her, and she denies it on the grounds that she does not bother trying to discuss mental sickness with anyone (except for someone similarly affected):

DJ: Do you think, maybe, that the difficulties with Brian made you more private?

ML: No I was always a quiet person ... although I'm happy go lucky – I'll walk around the office and I'll sing and I can talk to people and I can discuss my family with them ... but when it comes to discussing a sickness, a mental sickness I feel that people don't understand, because they type them ... Unless that person is actually experienced themselves, there is a girl here she had a nervous breakdown, . . . Occasionally I talk to her about Brian



When I yet again tried to ask her more directly about any possible feelings of being stigmatised (point 1- below) Mrs Land became quite hostile. Her reactions suggest that she was experiencing my questions as aggressive. In fact, I was aware that I became quite defensive and even a little confrontational at this point. I think that some of the anxiety and shame that Mrs Land struggles with emerged (2) as she brings up the possibility that others might see her son as a 'loony':

DJ: Do you think people might look at you differently (1) ...

ML: No.

DJ: if you told them about Brian?

ML: No. It doesn't bother me. To me mental sickness, and any illness, is an illness to me.

DJ: But I know other people say, they think other people will look at them differently, that others will look down on them?

ML: No. No. I don't feel that at all, I'm proud of my son.

DJ: I know you are [*said with some emphasis*], but I'm just saying that I know other people have said to me that they are reluctant to talk to friends and colleagues about their son or daughter because they think that they will be looked down on.

ML: No. You see I feel confident enough that if I spoke to anyone about my son I'm able to get across to them. Whereas there wouldn't be any of that, I don't believe that people would think that, because I know my own ability that when I start talking to someone they were able to understand. ... [] . . I've never found anyone yet, haven't met anyone yet who's been biased. I mean you hear about it, but I've never met anyone. And I feel that if I did meet somebody that I would talk them around it, so that they would understand, so I don't feel that someone's going to think my son's a loony (2), in layman's language, so it doesn't bother me.

Afterwards I had to think hard about why the interview became so heated; why had I begun to argue with Mrs Land; why had she ended up using derogatory language about her son? I had to think about, what would be called in a clinical context, the counter-transference issues. It was unique in this study for me to become confrontational during the interview. I was normally focused on listening hard and allowing people to 'tell their own story', and showing some empathy for what

they had experienced. Was I simply being too rational – perhaps it was ‘obvious’ that Mrs Land found it difficult to talk to others, was I simply annoyed with her for not agreeing? Did Mrs Land trigger something in me? In terms of age I could have been her son, was she playing a role in my own internal family drama? Through a great deal of thought, reading and discussing this with others, I was led to think about the important role that shame had played. I came to the view that Mrs Land did experience feelings of shame about her son, the way he was and her own struggle to engage with him. Through reading what was then only an emerging literature in psychoanalysis on shame (eg, Nathanson 1987), I came to understand how feelings of shame can both stifle communication and trigger feelings of anger. We both had acted out this dynamic - we had ceased to communicate and briefly in the interview I became part of the hostile world that she thinks cannot understand and care for her son. A further psychoanalytic concept could be used at this point - this could be seen as an example of ‘projective identification’ (Hinshelwood, 1989). Perhaps Mrs Land has projected the hostile feelings that she has about her son onto me, and I have responded by helping her to act out this split – she has good thoughts about her son whilst I, and the rest of the world, have bad ones.

Even whilst shame can be seen as a very intimate emotion, that operated within this specific encounter, it is important to maintain the capacity for binocular vision and to be aware of the social framework. In this case, these families were struggling to make sense of their lives within specific contexts. On the one hand there were the policy initiatives that were closing the long-term beds in psychiatric hospitals asylums and putting greater responsibility on them, but more subtly they were having to cope with the ‘myths’ and fantasies about family life that surrounded them (Jones 2002). Mrs Land’s experiences of shame could only really be fully appreciated alongside these expectations of family life and relationships.

For more accounts of somewhat more formal approaches to the design of studies, are two approaches that both depend on taking in the biographical details of the interviewee there are the ‘Free Association Narrative Interview’ (Hollway and Jefferson 2002) and the ‘Biographical Narrative Interview Method’ (Wengraff 2001). For details of the design of the psychosocial interviewing method in criminological contexts see Gadd (2012), and in the context of intimate relationships, Brown (2009).

Whilst the psychosocial interview, coupled with the binocular vision, has been the most debated of psychosocial methods there are no other methods that have come to the fore in recent years. We will examine these in the following sections.

## Observational methods

A notable strand of psychosocial method has come from the tradition of observation. Whilst there are obvious and important links to be made with ethnographic methods that have stressed the significance of 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) alongside the importance of reflexivity (Clifford and Marcus 1986) there has been the very specific influence of 'infant observation' (Rustin 2006) which has become a typical component of many psychotherapy training programmes. This followed the work of Esther Bick (1964) who described the process that required trainees, at the Tavistock Clinic in London, to carry out a series of close observations with a newly born baby over a period of months. At the heart of the method is close observation, entailing attention to the minutiae of the scene as well as a focus on the emotions that are experienced through the observation. The key ingredients of the method can be summarised (eg, from Urwin and Sternberg 2012)

1. The observation should take place for 1 hour and take place within the child's environment.
2. The observer should maintain an attitude of free floating attention, meaning that whilst being able to focus sufficiently on the baby and being close enough to the experience in the room, they should also maintain a certain amount of space in order to reflect on the experience and the associations provoked in the observer.
3. The observer needs to be available for the intense emotions that are experienced by infants and those around them.
4. The observer should not take any notes during the observation, because to do so would interfere with free floating attention of the observer and potentially be disturbing to those around.
5. During the observation the observer should resist the temptation to theorise the experience. Instead detailed notes should be made after the observation, as much as possible focusing on the minutiae of the events and the feelings invoked in the observer.
6. The notes are then discussed with a group of others and it is at this point that the experiences can be theorised.

We will look at a recent study that used this method by Gitz-Johansen (2020) who focused on young children below the age of two attending a nursery in Denmark. This is a good example of a study that

foregrounds a binocular perspective as it adopts the infant observation method 'in order to understand emotional processes among the staff in the nursery in the light of the political and institutional conditions' (2020: 266). The particular institutional conditions are those shaped by what Gitz-Johansen characterises as a move towards more neoliberal assumptions (marked by insistence on performance measurement and cost-saving) within a within a formerly comprehensive welfare system delivered by the Danish state. So, it is not only the highly focused observations that seek to understand the emotional world of the baby, but there is significant emphasis on the wider scene and context. Gitz-Johansen (2020) refers to the work of Alfred Lorenzer who working in the tradition of Frankfurt School thinking developed the concept of cultural or scenic psychoanalysis (Leithäuser 2012) as a method of widening the observational focus. Gitz-Johansen uses the idea from this that some experiences can become de-symbolised, as they 'lose an adequate language of expression'. Thus, the feelings invoked in the researcher in the particular scene might give an access to these de-symbolised elements that are present in the social scene. As Gitz-Johansen explains:

In my own emotional responses to being in the field (countertransference), I felt this collective de-symbolisation of young children's emotional needs as an overpowering sense of frustration and powerlessness about the distance between my experiences in the nursery and the public and current political discourse. While the political language (and much academic language) has to do with children's learning, the reality I experienced in the nursery was a daily struggle to care for the basic emotional needs . . . [T]hese concerns are very present among the staff members, who nevertheless find their experience and concerns rendered invisible by the dominant discourse' (Gitz-Johansen 2020: 268)

This is a good example of the use of an observational method that uses psychosocial principles. Alongside the emphasis on gathering data on the fine detail of the covert and emotional aspects of people's experiences, there is also the effort to maintain the binocular vision to include the significant social context.

Observational techniques have been used to study organisations, notably combined with interviews. Price et al (2018) for example study emotional processes within a school serving the needs of children with highly disturbed behaviour. Observational techniques have been deployed to study the transition to motherhood as it takes place in particular cultural circumstances (Urwin and Sternberg 2012, Urwin et al. 2013) and the dynamics of families with a teenager with severe learning difficulties (Hingley Jones 2011).

The following methods we will look at are those that represent something of a shift towards the overt study of the social group or community rather than the individual with a social context.

## Psychosocial Methods and Groups

Given the emphasis in psychosocial studies on understanding the social context within which relationships and mental states exist, it is perhaps surprising that approaches that focus primarily on the group, rather than the individual, have only recently become prominent in discussions of psychosocial methodologies. There are now methodologies emerging that have been influenced by theories and practices that arose in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, notably through schools of thought developed from experiments with group and community therapy that took place in British military psychiatry during the second world war (Bridger and Harrison 2000). These initiatives were prompted by the need to treat those who were suffering from battle trauma that had become recognised as a psychological condition, at least with psychiatric circles (Harrison and Clarke 1992), but were also influenced by the more general involvement of military psychiatry in wider personnel matters, such as the selection of staff for officer roles (Murray 1990), that was bringing a wider array of the population to psychiatric attention. In addition to the development of democratic therapeutic communities (Kennard 1998) two schools of group analysis precipitated in the post war period. One was influenced by Bion's work with groups (Bion 1961) that has found some expression through the work of the Tavistock Institute (Trist and Murray 1990). The other is associated with the name of Foulkes and the work of the Institute for Group Analysis (Foulkes and Anthony 1964). Both of these schools have had their influence on the design of research methodologies that aim to understand psychological processes that occur at the level of the group: social dreaming and the associated visual matrix.

## Social Dreaming

Social dreaming as a specific methodological technique was formalised by Gordon Lawrence (2003) as a method for exploring the psychosocial terrain of what is shared, perhaps unknowingly, between members of a social group. Lawrence acknowledges the work of Charlotte Beradt a journalist working in Nazi Germany in the 1930s on the social significance of dreams. The inspiration for her project was her own experience of waking from nightmares, in the years when the Nazi party were taking the reins of power, of being 'hunted from pillar to post . . . shot at, tortured, scalped', that would leave her wide awake, 'bathed in perspiration'. She wondered about other people and that perhaps the 'things that filled my dreams must fill theirs too – breathless flight across fields, hiding

at the top of towers of dizzying height, cowering down below in graves, everywhere the Storm Troopers at my heels' (Beradt 1943: 333). Thus, she began to ask various friends and contacts to collect dreams from others (Lawrence 2003) and found that other people were indeed having these terrifying and paranoid dreams. As Lawrence underlines these dreams 'were not produced by conflicts that were rooted either in the private realm of the dreamer or in a psychological trauma', instead they were prompted by 'the disturbed human relations' within the 'public realm', and it was thus: 'The political milieu was the cause of the dreams' (Lawrence 2003:616). The significant point can also be made that since the dreams were taking place in the years when the Nazi party was establishing their totalitarian grip, these dreams were reaching beyond the actual capacity of the Nazi Party at this point to patrol and monitor the conduct of individuals. There was a sense that the dreams themselves were not only symptomatic of a paranoid and terrifying political climate, but they themselves were becoming part of the psychosocial landscape as individuals were being involuntarily co-opted into the regime of terror. In order to understand how states of mind like this can be reciprocally connected to the surrounding milieu, Lawrence invoked the concept of 'the matrix' as a site of study, a term borrowed from Foulkes' work in group psychoanalysis (Lawrence 2003 :617). The use of 'matrix' in social dreaming is certainly consistent with its use in group analysis as an important model for understanding the connections between individuals in a group so that 'the group' has an existence that is not simply explicable as the sum of its parts. To Foulkes the matrix is 'the hypothetical web of communication and relationship in a given group. It is the common shared ground, which ultimately determines the meaning and significance of all events and upon which all communication and interpretations, verbal and non-verbal rest . . .' (Foulkes, 1964: 292).

Despite using the concept of 'the matrix', Lawrence worked in the *other* tradition of group analysis that stemmed from the work of Bion. It is Bion's attempts to create a model for the organisation of thinking that is of particular relevance here. Bion (1962) supposed that human consciousness could be understood as an organ designed to process thought. He suggested that the raw ingredients of thought could be called beta-elements. In this raw form they are not available to conscious awareness, but must be processed by alpha-functions to form alpha elements that might be understood as thoughts that could be thought. The important point here is that beta-elements had an existence outside the individual (in Foulkes' terms they were already available in the matrix). They could be impacting on us but could not be thought about. Lawrence suggests that a social dreaming exercise involves the expression of fragments of ideas and feelings that can be processed and synthesised by the group. In Bion's terms the beta elements are converted to alpha elements and thus become amenable to conscious thought. There is the potential for therapeutic purpose

here, but also for something that is distinctly creative as groups of people, and organisations might be come aware of different ways of being and working. This reflect Lawrence’s work as part of the Tavistock Institute and the belief that social dreaming can help groups and individuals to think.

Lawrence himself describes the process of social dreaming:

Social dreaming takes place in a matrix. People come together to share their dreams. Someone will give an account of a dream at the beginning of a session. Others follow. There is a flow to the dream in that one dreamer intuitively fits his or her dream into the previous one. The taker will offer a comment on the possible links and connections between the dreams. The term “taker” is used to describe the persons who are convening the matrix. Their role is to further the work of the matrix, which is stated in the primary task: to associate to one’s own and other participants’ dreams that are made available to the matrix so as to make links and find connections. (Lawrence 2003a :2)

More details on how to plan and organise sessions are provided by Neri (2003) for example. Sessions might last one and half hours and should ideally be part of a series as themes can be developed over time. It is generally believed best not to have more than about 30-35 participants and larger groups like this would need two or three leaders, whilst smaller ones could just have one. Any leaders or researchers should be spread amongst the group as they are arranged in such a way, in a snowflake pattern (Figure 1) for example, that avoids people facing one another in order to facilitate the free-association to the dreams that people are listening to and discourage a simple discussion between individuals. The leader might want to give some instructions at the beginning of the session although participants might have been briefed at a preliminary meeting, or perhaps with a written explanation of the process beforehand (Neri 2003:16). It needs to be explicitly understood that the purpose of the social dreaming is not to interpret the dreams of any individual. This should be made clear in any briefing or introduction, but the leader might need to intervene during a session if the conversation begins to become stuck around an individual or their dream.

Insert

Figure 2: the snowflake pattern of chair arrangement.

Karola and Manley (2018) used a social dreaming methodology with a group of young British muslims in order to explore hypotheses about the impact of islamophobia on their sense of identity. Three sessions were held mainly involving young people from Pakistani backgrounds from the north west of England. The sessions last 40 minutes and were followed by 15 minutes discussion and were all recorded and transcribed. The researchers met after all sessions were complete to reflect on the data. The researchers report themes of disconnect between their Muslim identity and senses of belonging in Britain. There were also anxieties of persecution as well and the authors drew worrying parallels between the work of Beradt discussed earlier. Clare and Zarbafi (2009) gather a number of experimental uses of the social dreaming method designs, including one that was used over several days at a literary festival and involved the collection of written dreams from attendees of the festival.

We will move on to what has emerged as a development of social dreaming that is perhaps particularly amenable to work within social science settings.

### Visual Matrix Methodologies

An important development from social dreaming has been the emergence of the use of the visual matrix as a method of social research (Manley and Roy 2017). The fundamental premises of the method are similar to those used in social dreaming. A number of people are brought together as a group and are encouraged to free-associate as a way of gaining some insight into the matrix. Instead of dreams being the focus of discussion, participants are encouraged to respond to particular visual images, or to bring images that come to mind to the group. This can make the method easier to steer towards the topics that the researcher might be interested in and is also one that is easier to intuitively grasp, it is a more ordinary task.

The design of a study using a visual matrix can be summarised (eg, from Froggett, Manley, and Roy 2015):

1. Between 6 and 35 participants are gathered in a comfortable space where they will not be interrupted. The sample might be selected according to the subject of the study. No previous knowledge of the method is necessary.
2. There should be at least one facilitator (with another for larger groups) and one researcher who takes notes.



3. Seating is arranged in a snow-flake pattern the room so that both participants and facilitators do not directly face one-another.
4. The room them might be shown particular visual stimuli – the images, paintings and photographs. Alternatively, participants might be encouraged to talk about images that come to mind, perhaps inspired by being exposed to particular stimuli.
5. The facilitator then encourages ‘expressions of images, associations, thoughts and feelings as and when participants wish’. The facilitator takes the equivalent role of the conductor in group analysis, they will not direct the conversation, but will encourage and model the free association around the images rather than more discursive exchanges.
6. The session will last around an hour, whilst a researcher takes notes and the session is recorded.
7. Afterwards there is a short break, the chairs are re-arranged into a circle or semi-circle and the facilitator invites participants to reflect on the themes that emerged. Flip charts might be used to map the linkages between ideas.

A good example is the study by Hughes et al. (2014) who were asked to advise a homelessness project called ‘the Men’s Room’ in Manchester UK. They used a mix methods study, using a walking interview method (Evans and Jones 2011) to engage with the men who used the service themselves. The men showed the researcher significant locations in their lives as homeless men. Whilst this was not developed as a psychosocial method, it is certainly consistent with the principles and can be used with a psychosocial sensibility towards engaging with people at a level that allows for more emotional and expressive communication. They also used a visual matrix method to try and learn more about the organisation itself. The visual matrix in this case consisted of staff and volunteers who worked for the organisation. The task of the visual matrix was presented as follows:

‘To allow the emergence of associations of images, feelings and ideas on the theme of the relationships between staff, volunteers and the men in the Men’s Room; to give expression to these associations whenever the participants feel the need to do so; to make links and connections between the images, feelings and ideas, and in this way create new thoughts.’ (Manley and Roy 2017 :136)

The researchers were present and participated and facilitated the matrix, all contributions were transcribed. After the ‘visual matrix event’ participants were asked to make their own drawings on provided paper. These images were then placed in the middle of the group that was arranged in a circle. Participants were asked to move images around in order to make connections and this led to

much discussion of the meaning and interpretation of the images. The researchers then met as a 'research panel', drawing together all the data that included the transcriptions from the visual matrix, photographs of the images produced by participants alongside their own reflections. The panel systematically went through all of the data, starting with reading aloud the transcripts from the 'visual matrix' and moving to each giving their own reflections with the emphasis being on producing as much as possible in terms of ideas and hypotheses. After this there is a more testing discussion of the various hypotheses as the group tries to avoid the pitfalls of 'wild analysis'. The analysis of the visual matrix emphasised the ambivalence of the work in which the organisation was involved. They work with a highly marginalised group of men who themselves can be very reluctant to engage with services. The workers in the organisation could be caught between their commitment to optimism alongside their feelings of hopelessness; their wanting to care whilst working within a system that demanded control; their belief in what they were doing which might contrast with what was measurable and therefore was reportable. All this had to be understood in terms of an organisation working in era of government imposed austerity and financial cuts. As Manley and Roy (2017) suggest these themes are not necessarily new, but they felt the organisation and the workers within it, had gained by the affective sharing of images that had brought these complexities to the forefront of awareness where they could be discussed.

Hollway et al. (2020) describe an adaption of a visual matrix methodology that was designed to accommodate the virtual attendance of two participants whilst the rest of the group were gathered in one room. As the theme of global heating was being explored this was therefore particularly pertinent.

### Psychosocial Analysis and History

A further widening of the focus of psychosocial enquiry takes place when studies are designed to draw in the history of the subject of enquiry. The interest in tracing a history of the present has become a common sociological endeavour (Garland 2014), and Walkderdine and Jimenez (2012) integrated this concern to psychosocial empirical enquiry as they sought to study the psychosocial reality of a contemporary community that had undergone high levels of social change. They report how they were drawn to the significance of history as they sought to understand the impact of industrial decline on a community they called 'Steeltown', located in what might be described as a 'post-industrial' region of South Wales in the UK.

They used psychosocially informed interviews with different generations of the community, the broad principles of which are described above (section 'Interviewing'). They report meeting with a group of ex-steel workers who had volunteered to maintain the archive on the steel works whose recent closure formed the catalyst for their study. They realised that 'the past in the present' was central to understanding the lives of the people they were studying (Walkerdine and Jimenez 2012: 8). The archive helped them to piece together and illustrate a two hundred year history that began with iron works in 1790 and ended with the closure of the steel works in 2002, and is interwoven with the surrounding region that was at the forefront of the industrial revolution through the 19<sup>th</sup> century thanks to the exploitation of the natural resources of iron ore and coal. The surrounding coal mines provided employment on a huge scale, drawing in workers from across Britain and Europe. Close knit and highly politicised communities emerged around the industrial centres and the area played a significant, and proud, role in union and labour movements as they came to have considerable political influence in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Francis and Smith 1998). The history was marked by a series of tumultuous events that included economic decline, boom and industrial strife. The demise of the coal mines and steel works through the 20<sup>th</sup> century led to high levels of emigration and of unemployment and social distress amongst the remaining population. Thus, the closure of the steel works in 'Steeltown' in 2002 was in many ways only the final symbol of the transition of the area to a post-industrial future. The researchers realised that they were not studying a formerly stable community that had then suffered a trauma of a large employer closing. Instead, it 'became distressingly increasingly obvious' that there had been little stability over two centuries (Walkerdine and Jimenez 2012: 7). This instability, they suggest, had an impact on the relationships within the families and community they were studying and in the mental states of the individuals they interviewed and that they were finding 'the contours of the past as it appears in and constitutes the present affects and practices' (Walkerdine and Jimenez 2012:8). To support this endeavour they also invoke the idea of the matrix that enabled them 'to appreciate better the profound significance of past and present local socio-cultural/transgenerational relational factors and forces mediating the responses from the whole community' (Jimenez and Walkerdine (2012: 279). In order to capture the intergenerational nature of this matrix they sought interviews with sons and parents and their psychosocial approach to those interviews meant they were alert to the affective dynamics within the interviews. One important finding were levels of shame within some of the interviews and the need for this to be understood not simply in terms of the individual, or even the particular generational relationship – but was it was 'circulating toxically around the town' (Jimenez 2014:154). They argue that the matrix that they encountered in these 'left behind' communities in South Wales enforced a highly gendered division of labour. The young men they

interviewed who had not done well in the education system no longer had access to the relatively high status, masculine jobs in mining or steel making. Walkerdine and Jimenez use the concept of shame to understand how these feelings and strictures were being passed down through the generations and across the community. Here this manifested in the reluctance of the young adult men to seek jobs in the service industry. This was despite the fact that this was one avenue open to those without few qualifications, and this was leaving them in a difficult position.

Other psychosocial work has also taken the topic of history very seriously. As Jacobsen (2020) notes there was an important strand of psychosocial enquiry that formed around the work on psychosocial history work of Erikson that is danger of being forgotten. Alford (2019) addresses the importance of history in his study of the intergenerational transmission of trauma that subjects interviews with holocaust survivors to a psychosocial reading, but also makes the case that the idea of trauma needs itself to be historically situated.

## Validity and ethics in psychosocial research

There are many aspects of validity and ethics dealt with in this volume. This discussion will limit itself to the particular dilemmas brought up through the application of psychosocial methods that encourage the researcher to assume that those interviewed, observed or otherwise are not always able to report what is most significant. There may be onus on the psychosocial researcher to interpret what is being said or observed.

At the heart of the analysis of my interview described in section 'Interviewing, The analysis: the emergence of shame' is my interpretation of what happened during the interview. Mrs Land denied the experience of stigma, and yet I argue that actually she feels such shame about her son, the way he is and the way the world views him that she cannot think, let alone speak of this. Clearly there are the challenges of establishing the reliability of a finding like this. Whilst this challenge is often common to other qualitative methods, but here within the assumptions of a psychosocial method there is the more controversial problem here about the validity and the ethics of my assertion. Even if I am correct in my interpretation, what right do I have to impose my view? There is not the space to fully explore this point here, some of the general issues are explored elsewhere (Frosh and Baraitser 2010, and other papers in the same volume) and in this particular case (Jones 1998). On the one hand it should be said that the interview was one of a number that were used to confirm the perspective and also that I was committed to showing how I reached the conclusion I did. Ultimately, I felt that there was an imperative to try and say something honest, in a way that was constructive, about the lives I was trying to understand. To take what people say at face value is as much of an

interpretation as it is to look beneath the surface. Whilst the most striking dilemmas occur in one to one interviews, it may also be that rather different dilemmas might apply to the application of observational methods and those involving analysis of the matrix, although these are more likely to involve more typical ethical processes common to wider social science practices.

## Conclusion

Psychosocial Studies has emerged as a transdisciplinary area of enquiry that seeks explicitly to bring together psychological and sociological understanding of the human world. In some ways the area enjoys the paradoxical position of assuming a position of common-sense. On the one hand isn't it obvious that human beings exist in psychological and sociological worlds? On the other the disciplinary divisions mean that some intellectual dexterity is necessary to navigate across borders and it might be argued that the most important skill is that of the binocular vision. Nevertheless, as the chapter has demonstrated there are particular research methods that have developed to serve the needs of psychosocial studies. The emergence of psychosocial interviewing helped to mark out the initial territory of psychosocial studies as an attempt to move beyond the experimental assumptions of mainstream psychology, exploring the often hidden interior territory of the mind, and make bridges with nuanced social and cultural analyses. Whilst important caveats can be raised about the power that might be assumed by researchers interpreting the words and deeds of others, and that the interview method encourages focus at the individual level, the idea that the psychosocial researcher needs to research 'beneath the surface' (Clarke and Hogget 2015) has remained central. Observational methods have become more common and can help to mitigate against too great a focus at the individual level. Later developments of psychosocial methods have enlarged the frame by attempting to research more overtly at the level of the group. The notion of the matrix, borrowed from group analysis, has been used in order to go beyond the individual whilst at the same time maintaining some focus on the psychological level. The matrix is a metaphor for the place where the psychological world of individuals meet to form the medium in which people think, communicate and dream. There are also psychosocial approaches that directly try to comprehend the historical construction of the matrix. Indeed, to take a historical perspective is to understand that the need for psychosocial enquiry has become more pressing. It is arguable that the social changes being wrought over the past 100 years or so have made the grasp of a psychosocial perspective ever more important. It would be in keeping with a number of historical analyses to suggest that we are now living in times where affective responses have become entwined with social

structural issues Elias<sup>ii</sup> (1994/1939). Psychosocial studies as a field of enquiry, has gained ground in the past 30 years and Mclaughlin (2019:9) suggests it is a 'paradigm whose time has come'.

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<sup>i</sup> Object relations are theories influenced initially by the work of Melanie Klein that emphasise how the internal world of the individual is built through relationships with other. Raynor (1991) traces some of the history and ideas.

<sup>ii</sup> It is worth noting that Elias worked with Foulkes and there is evident influence of Elias on group analysis.