Rethinking Psychoanalysis in the Psychosocial

Stephen Frosh

Abstract

Psychoanalysis has a central yet contested position in the emergence of psychosocial studies as a new 'transdisciplinary' space. Psychoanalysis potentially offers a vocabulary and practice of crossing boundaries that seems to be at one with the psychosocial project of understanding psychic and social processes 'as always implicated in each other, as mutually constitutive, co-produced, or abstracted levels of a single dialectical process.' The intersection 'psychoanalysis, culture, society', with its promise of an explicit engagement with social, political and ethical relations, and its traversing of disciplinary boundaries across the arts, humanities and social sciences, should therefore be crucial for the psychosocial project. This paper will consider where we are with 'psychoanalysis, culture and society' in relation to the 'psychosocial' – and what this means for a world much in need of more fluid, trans/disruptive boundaries.

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This is an interesting time to reconnect with the ambition to create a meeting point called 'psychoanalysis, culture, society'. Psychoanalysis itself continues under siege, despite enormous continued interest in Freud, much of it sympathetic (Roudinesco, 2016; Whitebook, 2017). As a clinical practice this has long been the case, and psychoanalysts have had to adapt themselves to the neo-liberal emphasis on effectiveness and economic efficiency by developing interventions that are more flexible and generally much briefer than the classical psychoanalytic arrangement. But it is also noteworthy that psychoanalysis, despite its huge contribution to, and innumerable provocations within, social theory and cultural studies, has been regularly under fire from its more radical critics for its political, gender and social normativeness; its colonialist and racialized practical and theoretical frameworks; and its continued adoption of a psychologically reductionist vision in what has become a radically decentred world.

Yet psychoanalysis remains an important resource for studies of the intersection of the human subject, culture and society. This is because its conceptual vocabulary contains within it some of the best worked out articulations of what it might mean to be 'subjected to' forces that both create and constrain the 'social' subject; and also because it traces in some detail routes through which these forces become 'lived' and are themselves operated on and by subjects. This is perhaps just a convoluted way of addressing the old agency-structure conundrum, and noting again, with Butler (1997), that human subjects are constructed as objects and agents of power – we are *subjected to* forces, but we also *have* force and impact; we can change the things around us just as they might change us.

What makes this time so interesting, however, is not the relatively insignificant question about how well psychoanalysis is faring, but rather what the drive is to understand 'culture and society' at all. Things are bad, times are hard, madness seems to be pervasive; lies, manipulations and violence certainly rule the day. I will not rehearse the immense amount of human suffering that is around, and how puny our resources seem to be when called to face up to it. But it is worth noting how strongly issues of boundaries, walls and nationalist restrictions have come into play (Brown, 2010). Rather than celebrate the interconnectedness of the world, which is the truth of it – even if this interconnectedness also means interconnected vulnerabilities and so can be frightening as well as exhilarating – barriers are going up everywhere, as if it is possible to keep the barbarians out, whether they be imagined generically as 'migrants' or 'terrorists', or even, more abstractly, 'globalisation'. It is exhausting to watch and even more so to contest, to keep on pointing out that the barbarians are already here, they reside in each of us; there is no 'good inside' versus 'bad outside', but only a muddled reality with which we have to deal. It might even be fun to pull apart the crass logic of

exclusion as it sets up its caricatures and nonsensical logics of 'them and us', as if nothing can or will ever be learnt from the past, even the very recent past. The problem is, one cannot laugh when faced with such a destructive world view, where the stakes are so high – even the future of the planet might be at risk, given prevalent political attitudes both to warfare and to climate change – and where the suffering caused by these 'culture and society' dynamics is so great.

So does 'psychoanalysis, culture, society' matter in the face of this reality, and if so in what ways? In a parallel academic universe, there has been the emergence of a new critical strand of work, psychosocial studies, that rejects the reductionism of psychology and sociology and instead attempts to study psychic and social processes, as we say, 'as always implicated in each other, as mutually constitutive, co-produced, or abstracted levels of a single dialectical process' (Frosh, 2018a). The intersection 'psychoanalysis, culture, society', with its promise of an explicit engagement with social, political and ethical relations, and its traversing of disciplinary boundaries across the arts, humanities and social sciences, should therefore be crucial for the psychosocial project. On the other hand, the possible hegemony of psychoanalytic discourse (which at times has made psychosocial studies seem like a branch of psychoanalytic studies) not only obscures the contribution made by some alternative approaches, but also produces tensions with some other 'trans' components of the psychosocial studies enterprise: notably, postcolonial and queer studies. These approaches also break boundaries, but in this case the boundaries of established disciplines, either (or both) those set by colonialism or by gender normativity and heterosexism. Or to put this in less flamboyant terms, what we are dealing with is a set of questions about how, in relation to this psychosocial project to rethink the relations surrounding the 'social (human) subject', psychoanalysis can contribute something new and progressive. This is particularly an issue given psychoanalysis' history, which I will not labour here: its roots in colonialism (Brickman, 2003; Frosh, 2017) and in gender normativity (Goldner, 2003) as well as its frequent resort to conservatism, especially when faced with authoritarianism in the surrounding world (Frosh and Mandelbaum, 2017; Damousi and Plotkin, 2012). This conservatism is counterbalanced by a long history of progressive theory and practice, not just from the 1930s luminaries such as Wilhelm Reich and Otto Fenichel (Jacoby, 1983), but also Freud himself and the Free Clinics movement to which he gave impetus (Danto, 2005), plus a host of latter-day Lacanians (Stavrakakis, 2007). It is not worth repeating all the issues around the tensions within psychoanalysis over the conservatism-radicalism axis, as this has been done many times before (Frosh, 2018b); let us simply say that this tension exists, and it is part of the intriguing nature of psychoanalysis as it struggles with its own history, its own inhibitions and pressures towards freedom. Just as misogyny was there from the beginning of psychoanalysis, yet also fought against in its awareness and legitimation of female desire; and just as psychoanalysis has both colonial roots and the capacity to reveal the operations of colonial assumptions and unconscious ideologies – to disrupt, that is the colonial taken-for granted by revealing the excess of 'primitivism' in each 'civilized' subject (Frosh, 2017); so more generally, psychoanalysis is both part of the political problem and part of its solution.

Trans

From a psychosocial perspective, psychoanalysis has been an obvious ally. The reasons for this include a set of issues around disciplinary status, or rather around the difference between *inter*disciplinarity and *trans*disciplinarity. Without getting too caught up with definitional refinements here, psychosocial studies tends to adopt a view that interdisciplinarity, despite its many critical and practical virtues, does not replace the assumptions of traditional disciplines but hides them under a carapace of apparent integration. Interdisciplinarity combines perspectives drawn from its base disciplines (in the psychosocial arena this particularly includes psychology and sociology) because of the gaps revealed in these disciplines when they are applied to new problems, but it does not deconstruct the original disciplines in so doing. Interdisciplinarity is a response to the demonstrable inadequacy of single discipline approaches to the complex and fragmentary nature of social life, but it carries within it the same old hope – that of achieving 'unity of knowledge'. This hope, which in psychoanalytic terms can be theorised as an Imaginary response to the problem of how to deal with dissolution, is consoling, enabling, sometimes empowering, even therapeutic. But it is a fantasy, one which denies the way in which the social world is constructed in contradiction by clinging on to the image of a unified theory that will make sense of, and provide ultimate solutions to, supposedly shared problems. In this way, it is simply the latest version of a very strong tendency both to deny the existence of conflict and to seek an integrative, reparative response to difficulty. This fantasy of integration is not in itself malicious, of course; rather, it is psychologically and socially defensive. It allows us to disavow the threat that comes from the actual incommensurability of otherness in the world by imagining that everything can be brought together as one. To adopt a slightly idiosyncratic differentiation here: we can all work together from our different perspectives (the theme of *multidisciplinarity*); we can draw on each other's work in order to create one integrated story about the social world (*interdisciplinarity*). But we cannot achieve the idealised unity – that is the real 'problem' – and maybe we *should* not.

This might seem slightly startling, but it is one of the insights of a number of critical perspectives, from radical psychoanalysis to postcolonial studies to psychosocial studies. The point is that the fantasy of integration and oneness is not merely utopian; it also hides the conditions of power that make it viable. It suggests that we can gather together everything into one whole, when actually the reason that they are separate is because some positions dominate others. To use Gayatri Spivak's (1988) famous terminology, for instance, 'subalterns' cannot simply be brought together with colonial powers; the very existence of the latter depends on othering the former as deficient and different. Similarly, psychoanalysis cannot be used unconditionally as a meta-theory once we become aware of how deeply rooted it is in colonial assumptions and modes of practice. This does not mean that psychoanalysis cannot be of use in postcolonial settings; indeed, one of the ur-texts of postcolonialism, Frantz Fanon's (1952) *Black Skin, White Masks*, is a partially psychoanalytic text widely used in psychosocial studies to exemplify how psychoanalytic (in this case Lacanian) ideas can be used productively in a critical race context. But it does mean that psychoanalysis cannot simply stand its ground and speak about the postcolonial subject. Instead, it has to face the challenges to its autonomy and integrity that comes from this critical other, much as it has had to do in its dialogue with feminism. Differing disciplinary approaches, with their own histories and investments, may be in dialogue with one another but if they have critical

content, they will also be *opposed*. It is precisely the jostling for supremacy that makes an integrated position seem possible, when in actuality what is happening is simply the perpetuation of domination, or the substitution of one form of domination for another. One might have to recognise that contradictions exist, and give up on the idea that the social world is one in which any amount of interdisciplinary collaboration can pull us together.

It is in this context that the idea of transdisciplinarity offers a different way of conceptualising the possibilities of a critical engagement with hegemonic disciplines. Lisa Baraitser (2015, p. 212) gives a striking and playful account of what is at stake here, using the contemporary harmonics of the term 'trans' to suggest fluidity and a crossing of boundaries (as opposed to the more fixed movement from one end of a binary to another, which is another part of the 'trans' phenomenon):

> Unlike the prefix 'inter-', which retains a certain claustrophobia, signalling the situation of betweenness or amongness, trans- seems to gesture towards the great outdoors. We could say that a certain freedom accompanies whatever the prefix trans- attaches itself to, suggesting that a transdisciplinary concept, text, practice or method might be free to roam, inserting itself like a foreign entity within an otherwise homogeneous field, much like the genetic meaning of the term 'transformation'.

What psychosocial studies is looking for is a way of maximising this sense of being 'free to roam' and perhaps more importantly, this desire to maintain a sense of being a 'foreign entity' that disrupts claims to expert (disciplinary) knowledge and hegemonic truth. Obviously, this too can become a fantasy that a more unified understanding will come about if only we can dispense with the artificial boundaries of existing disciplines. However, the aspiration is to find a way of approaching understanding that regards all knowledge as unstable and provisional (not a particularly contentious point in critical circles), and that seeks to demonstrate this by unsettling the very knowledge that it generates. In psychosocial studies and elsewhere, some of the ways in which this is achieved is through the different modes of *reflexivity* that operate. This is not just the reflexivity that positions an observer, which all graduate students learn to respect and acknowledge by describing themselves in terms of their class, race and gender attributes. It is, in addition, a destabilising mode of reflexivity that asks questions about each knowledge claim, recognising the radical reflexivity of subject positions that means that as information is produced, so the situation changes; and that comprehends how people really are *subjects*, with an agentic capacity to use their situation (which includes research and therapeutic situations) to generate and alter their own understanding of the world. These differing modes of reflexivity – positioning the researcher, changing the situation, generating new subject narratives – require a fluidity of approach that has nothing to do with disciplinary affiliations but deliberately transgresses them. What is being opposed here is a fetish of methodological and disciplinary purity: intellectual work is better thought of as a kind of machine, grabbing what it can from what lies around, putting it together in novel ways, trying things out, returning to base, chipping away at assumed truths in order to uncover the mixture of assumptions, wishes, social forces and unconscious complexes that give them the form that they have.

Amongst the specific appeals that psychoanalysis holds for this transdisciplinary aspiration, there is in psychosocial studies recognition of the need for a set of ideas about 'interiority' (Wetherell, 2012) in order to examine how the agentic subject can be

more than just an epiphenomenon or 'fold' of the social (Blackman, 2008). Psychosocial studies also needs ideas about how this interior or inner space is populated through absorption of, and dynamic interaction with, social forces, especially as channelled through direct experiences of the social (which often means of other people). This is where psychoanalysis comes in forcefully, as it has what is probably the most developed vocabulary and conceptual armoury that offers the required theoretical resources for understanding an interiority that also moves across boundaries – a perception that perhaps started with Freud's attraction to telepathy as a model for the transfer of thoughts across space and between subjects (Frosh, 2013; Campbell and Pile, 2010). Notions such as repression and splitting convey the complexity of a mind in communication with itself, trying to resolve the contradictions of social experience intersecting with personal desires. Related ideas such as projection, identification and projective identification, and transference and countertransference, all offer highly sophisticated and often convincing descriptive and possibly explanatory frameworks for understanding the passionate interactions between the subject and the processes of social subjectification – that is, the patterns of engagement that occur between 'inner' and 'outer' as each of us navigates the social world. It is even possible to argue that the core psychoanalytic notion of 'the' unconscious is appealingly 'trans-individual' (Hook, 2008) because of the way unconscious ideas are not exactly 'personal': that is, they are held to 'speak through' the subject rather than be owned as such; they are unexpected visitors from elsewhere, even 'uncanny' in much of their activity (Frosh, 2013). In addition, whilst it might be possible to argue that psychoanalysis is itself a 'discipline' (it is certainly a practice and possibly an epistemology and methodology), it is clearly not 'owned' by any of the primary disciplines against which psychosocial studies tests itself – psychology, sociology, anthropology and the like. Instead, it drifts appealingly across academic boundaries: literature, social theory, politics, law, art history and film studies are all infected by it, however controversially that might be, and together they constitute the terrain of the 'culture' component of the 'psychoanalysis, society, culture' triad. Partly as a reaction to psychology's repudiation of psychoanalysis, but more because of these important psychosocial attributes of psychoanalysis itself, psychoanalysis has therefore become, if anything, the default for many psychosocial thinkers inventing their transdisciplinary new space, something to lean on in the rather dizzying kaleidoscope of what psychosocial studies might come to be.

Trauma

Opening the film, *Black Psychoanalysts Speak* (Winograd, 2014), Annie Lee Jones, a black American psychologist and psychoanalyst, says 'There has been near violent reactions to the things I say about the way racism, culture, and economic inequality affects my life and my work with my patients. I presented in London at the Freud Museum, and I talked about race. One psychiatrist grabbed me by my arm and wouldn't let me go up the steps.' What is particularly striking about this film is how the people in it, who can be classed as 'successful' in that they have all become analysts – that is, they have not been forced out or fallen by the wayside – express amusement, irony, anger, and most of all pain about the way psychoanalysis continues to struggle to recognise the conditions of racialization and racialized trauma, and hence its own contribution to sustaining this. Psychoanalysis is, it hardly needs to be said, not unique in this; my own experience of teaching in the university sector in the UK brings me face to face with the same pain, the same neglect – in my case from the position of one who keeps on overlooking it and has

to be brought up short by what often feels like a shocking, unexpected and intense outburst of subjugated rage. Sitting recently in a lecture hall full of black people, listening to a talk on 'the angry black woman' and hearing the experiences of abuse that black female academics are subjected to; or attending a talk about the genealogy of white slave-owning families and feeling the despair of a black woman who asks, 'yes, but how can I trace *my* ancestors, the slaves?' – these are shocking moments that demand of those of us in positions of influence and power (however small, however much coded as therapists or teachers in alliance with suffering others) that we consider what contribution we continue to make to the perpetuation of trauma as it passes on through one generation to another. This might amount to an even more searing challenge than the one along the same lines put forward by Jessica Benjamin (Altman et al, 2006): that even if we are not perpetrators of damage, we perpetuate it in the way we 'bump into the bruises' of those who come to us for help, and all the more so when we somehow overlook them, when we fail to acknowledge either the bruise itself, or the bumping that we do.

How well does psychoanalysis fare in the face of this challenge, which is central to the question of 'psychoanalysis, society', and no doubt culture too? There is little doubt that there have been considerable moves forward, in which 'race' and racism have become important objects of study in the discipline, and in which there is much firmer recognition of the realities both of racial hurt and suffering and of racism as a psychosocial phenomenon requiring active opposition along lines that psychoanalysis can help fuel. Some extraordinarily inventive and at times personally brave and exposing work has gone into this over the past twenty years (e.g. Davids, 2011; Seshadri-Crooks, 1994; Kovel, 1995). The use of psychoanalysis as a tool to help understand racism is also widespread, sometimes with dazzling and substantive results (Rustin, 1991; Hook, 2008). Perhaps surprisingly, even postcolonial studies, which has had much to say that is critical of psychoanalysis for its rootedness in colonial thought and its perpetuation of colonialist assumptions around issues of 'primitivity' (Brickman, 2003), has also seen many major theorists adopting psychoanalytic ideas as a way of portraying the postcolonial condition (Bhabha, 2004; Khanna, 2004). Much is happening that is progressive and good, and establishes the strength of the 'psychoanalysis, culture, society' reflexive triad. However, can we be confident? The many painful experiences referenced in *Black Psychoanalysts Speak*, the continuing apparent 'whiteness' of most psychoanalytic training institutes, the occasional resurgence of antisemitism as well as racism (Frosh, 2012; Davids, 2011) in the institutional practices of psychoanalysis; and also the repeated difficulty that psychoanalysis has had in facing up to a past history in which there has been at least as much complicity with authoritarian regimes as resistance to them (Damousi and Plotkin, 2012) all suggest a continuing problem that psychoanalysis has with its discontents. Putting this cautiously, we might say that psychoanalysis has become more aware of its 'culture, society' embeddedness, but not always more capable of facing up to the consequences of this.

What I am suggesting here is that psychoanalysis, which in some ways began as a way of reading trauma as it emerged as a concept in the late nineteenth century (Fletcher, 2013), can be judged as fully attuned to its 'psychoanalysis, culture, society' responsibilities only when it is able to consider again how trauma repeats itself, how it leaves traces and how – as Gordon (1997) described in her seminal examination of

ghostliness in society – it continues to insert itself until it is recognised and laid to rest. This can only happen under conditions in which psychoanalysis contests the increasingly febrile assertion of boundaries: disciplinary ones, as described above, but also those walls around nationalities, ethnicities, religious affiliations, class and gender differentiations that continue to structure and constrain the social world. We need to remember that the famous Robert Frost (1916) poem 'Mending Wall', quoted so often for saying, 'Good fences make good neighbors' is in fact a description of the *failure* of such barriers, and indeed a celebration of such failures: the poet would like to say to the neighbour who is invested in the barrier, 'Something there is that doesn't love a wall,/That wants it down.' It is to the extent that psychoanalysis can contribute to this process that it becomes a part of the 'trans' project that characterises psychosocial studies. We need it, in this world of walls, to keep on pointing out how defensiveness blocks progress and stifles creativity, and how centrally important is the permeability and fluidity that is so often declared to be the nature of the contemporary world, yet is also so often fought against and feared.

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