Between a rock and a ‘soft’ place: Psychosocial studies, shared experience and the arts.

Lynn Froggett

Psychosocial Studies has offered a transdisciplinary environment in which scholars can move between the social sciences and beyond them in an attempt to understand objects of inquiry as complex interlinked wholes. This has been accompanied in general by a respect for empirical research and for emergent methods that allow the object to reveal itself. It is for this reason that psychosocial approaches have much to offer professional disciplines such as social work, social pedagogy, psychotherapy and health, which concern themselves with how subjectivity is constituted within, and constitutive of social and institutional life. Many of us try to research individual lives in the knowledge that we are group animals and we study how groups, communities and societies take their character from both shared and individuated experience. For a number of years some of us have circled – somewhat gingerly – around the problem of how to conceptualise and research psychosocial processes that are unarticulated and at least partly unconscious.

In my own work this challenge has impelled a certain methodological nomadism though various branches of the social sciences, arts and humanities. This itinerancy can only flourish in the context of the transdisciplinary generosity that psychosocial studies affords. It has entailed a search for ways to integrate perspectives from other social practices, recently, for example, working with colleagues, in social work, organizational consultancy, education and the arts to adapt the principles of social dreaming for research purposes in ‘the visual matrix’. The unifying thread in all of this work is in constantly returning to the problem of what is hard to see, hard to speak of, or hard to bear in social life.

War and Order: Shaping thought about the individual and the social body.

David W Jones

“I was initially drawn to Psychosocial Studies for the frameworks it offered to understand people in terms that recognised psychological depth and complexity alongside the immanent nature of the relationship of the individual to our contemporary social worlds. Acknowledgement of the interdependence of individual experience and social structure led to an increasing interest in the history of psychosocial thought itself and the different ways that the relationships between the ‘psyche’ and the ‘social’ have been conceived over the past few centuries of social change that witnessed the development of the ‘modern world’.

I suggest that anxiety about war, disorder and violence over that period has often been a vital fuel to the construction of new understanding of the relationship between the individual and the social body, with very influential ideas emerging from particular periods of stress. It is well known that key events in the birth of ‘group analysis’ revolved around the 2nd World War. If important elements of its development emerged very directly from that experience of war, then obvious questions might be posed about the implications for this important strain of psychosocial thought and what forces might shape such thinking now?”
Virtual bystanders to human rights violations and humanitarian crises: a psychosocial enquiry into denial and social responsibility.
Bruna Seu

The contemporary global public sphere is full of information about the suffering of distant others. Information about humanitarian disasters, wars and human rights abuses are often transmitted within moments of them unfolding. Thus, the old refrain to justify inaction – ‘I didn’t know what was happening’ – is hardly credible. People know, but don’t always act on their knowledge. Very little is known about what such ‘humanitarian knowledge’ does to us, as ‘virtual bystanders’, and what we do with that knowledge. This presentation will introduce some of the findings from a series of projects that investigated the UK public’s understandings and reactions to information about human rights violations and humanitarian crises. It will concentrate on the blocks to connectedness and action, as well as the ‘3M’ model representing the factors that could facilitate an ongoing and meaningful involvement of members of the public with distant suffering and humanitarian issues. It will use the psychosocial concept of denial to investigate both the emotional reactions evoked in audiences and the socio-cultural scripts people use to make sense of humanitarian communications.

IGA Speakers

Do good fences make good neighbours? Psychoanalysis, Group Analysis, Group Relations and disturbances of groupishness in the psychosocial project.
Christopher Scanlon

This paper will suggest that there are disturbances of groupishness (Bion, 1960) at the heart, and in the mind, of the Psychoanalytic, Group Analytic and Group Relations projects. This is expressed as a functional incapacity and unwillingness to come together as a group, to deal with the wider psychosocial and political ‘group-as-a-whole’ problems. In this paper I will seek to join with others to ask how we might better understand these disturbances of groupishness and how they operate to prevent us from ‘living, learning and working’ together.

The Musical Matrix and the Improvisation of Belonging
Linde Wotton

The radical contribution of GA to the realm of the psychosocial is, in my view, the centrality accorded to transpersonal processes: unconscious processes seen as originating 'between' persons, so that neither society nor the individual psyche is seen as primary, but rather two sides of the same coin, each forming and being formed by the other through our interactions in the matrix - the network of communication. 'We speak of interacting processes in the unified field, the matrix of the group, and not of interacting individuals as if they were closed systems who send out and receive messages.' (Foulkes 1990, p214)

But how are we to understand this in terms of biologically constituted bodies? I will look at the evidence that human communication rests on an innate musicality and develop an argument for regarding the matrix as a ‘musical’ process. Together these offer a way of conceptualising the on-going transpersonal process of constituting and being constituted by the social at the same time. Presentational symbolism, such as music, has to do with wholes, things in their context, relationships, hierarchies, paradox, right hemisphere attention, so it is particularly suited to transmitting and elaborating information about social structures, cultural practices, power figurations and at the same time permitting the co-construction of the emerging narrative of the self. It is precisely this order of complexity – with all its contradictions – that music ‘presents’ and that our innate musicality allows us to appreciate and perform through the improvisation of belonging.
Group analysis and discipline anxiety: time for paradigm change?
Martin Weegman

In this brief presentation it is argued that group analysis faces a crisis of viability and continuity - (a) that the founding dependencies and metaphors of group analysis are limited and exhausted, (b) that absence of effective research leaves us vulnerable and that (c) disciplines such as group analysis run the risk of retreating into the comforts of a classicism and looking away from the need to change; we need more ‘democratic’ knowledge and not hide behind our specialist languages. Analytic therapies need to overcome their historical ‘narcissism’ and be willing to genuinely enter shared, interdisciplinary spaces. It is suggested that the ‘psychosocial field’ offers such a promise.