Why social work and sociology need the psychosocial

Abstract

Sociology and social work as disciplines have, over the last decades, had an, at best, ambivalent relationship. Whereas branches of sociology, such as symbolic interactionism have produce theory of immense use to social work (e.g. Goffman's 1968 'Stigma'; Giddens' 1991 work on identity offering concepts such as 'reflexive identification' and 'fateful moments') others are harder to utilise and indeed can seem to be antithetical to building social work theory for practice. Both structuralist and post-structuralist paradigms have been criticised for this latter difficulty. This paper argues that the current cross-disciplinary developments integrating scholars concerned with theory, research and practices, from within sociology, psychoanalysis, psychology, social policy and social work, with the academic and practice discipline of psychosocial studies, offers a way forward. The theory, the paper suggests, from Psychosocial Studies, allows a re-analysis of some of the impasses in applying post-structural sociological theory to essentially modernist projects such as social work. It also bridges traditional academic/practice divides such as the role of the 'knower' in relation to the 'known', and elucidates an agenda for research practices and methodologies which harness sociological and social work ontologies.

Key words: sociology; psychosocial; structure; theory; psychoanalysis

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Introduction

Over the last two decades a substantial body of UK literature and research

has been generated in the social sciences to form an emerging discipline called

Psycho-social, or Psychosocial Studies (the hyphen is part of a complex debate,

and used by some and not others). From within the disciplines of sociology,

psychology, social policy, psychotherapy, psychoanalysis and social work a

academic grouping, recently designated 'The Association For Psychosocial

Studies' in the UK, has configured across these subject boundaries and across

research and practice (see for example, author and anon 2014; Walkerdine and

Jimenez 2012; Bainbridge et al 2007; Cooper and Lousada 2005; Frosh et al

2002; Hoggett 2001). In social work a renewed interest in the application of

psychoanalytic and psychodynamic thinking to practice and research has

emerged, for example in work on relationship-based practice (Trevithick 2003;

Ruch 2012**)** on child protection (Ferguson 2005) and on suicide (Briggs 2008)**.**

This paper aims to consider how the psychosocial theory emerging

contemporarily from within sociology and related disciplines can bridge the

traditional divide between sociology and social work and address some of the

problems for each in their theoretical relationships with the other. The contrast

between contemporary psychosocial thinking and the much criticised forms of

psychodynamic and psychosocial casework in social work, as practiced in 1960s

and 70s (Hollis 1965) will be underscored.

The article initially explores what contemporary psychosocial studies is (and is

not), how and where it is being developed and what some of its themes are now.

Next it establishes a focus on the relationship between sociology and social work,

from Marxism through to post-structuralism, and considers how particularly the

latter has exacerbated divisions between these two disciplines. The example of identity is used to illustrate how psychosocial theory can improve this. The paper considers some of the shared concerns of both sociology and social work, particularly identity and reflexivity, and considers the role of psychosocial thinking in supporting and advancing this mutual engagement. Finally the paper considers the frequently divisive area of research, and presents an example of psychosocial research which integrates sociological and social work concerns, practices and approaches: in other words how the psychosocial can advance relevant and theoretically rigorous knowledge production for both of these disciplines in a mutually inclusive process.

What is psychosocial theory now?

 'Psychosocial' in itself is a slippery term, having been used in slightly different ways in different disciplines, so to 'clear the decks' of potential misunderstandings, it seems worth briefly establishing what it is not, before considering its specific contemporary usage under discussion in this paper.
In the 1960s and 1970s in the UK, the USA and parts of Europe, it was fairly ordinary to have studied psychosocial theory as part of social work training. This was exemplified in texts on casework and/or clinical social work, by e.g. Hollis, (1965) which had Freudian psychoanalytical thinking at their heart. Even though the nomenclature references 'social', the work had very little to do with 'social', in the sense of sociological or societal, and was criticised by much radical thinking from the mid 1970s for precisely this. Collective movements in social work such as 'CASE CON' in the 1970s sought to re-inject a socio-political dimension into such an individualistic approach (Lavalette 2011)

In clinical casework, as Hollis prescribed, and indeed also in some contemporary clinical psychology research and practise, the use the 'social' dimension of 'psychosocial' tends to mean the familial context of the individual, and occasionally other networks of relationships. (e.g. Rutter 1987). Almost never does such work engage with structural sociology's concerns, of power, class and socio-political oppression. Issues such as misogyny and racism, are rarely discussed. The intersection of structural and individual identity issues at the heart of 'new' psychosocial thinking, where the psychoanalytically theorised internal world tangles with the impact of e.g. class oppression (see below), is missing.

Psychosocial theory is also not interchangeable with social psychology. The lack of a structural oppression dimension is one of the main distinguishing features between this and the psychosocial theory being discussed in this paper, even though social psychology often discusses the individual in context, and the impact of the external world on the psychic life of the individual. And indeed there is a great deal of extremely useful work in the social psychology field. Goffman, for example, was hugely concerned with how the judgements and responses of people in the outside world impacted on individual identity, for good and bad. However he does not theorise the internal world as such: no structure of the mind is offered in his work. Nor does he theorise social power relations, though his understanding of the 'top down' power of some societal institutions- e.g. as discussed in 'Asylums'- is a very helpful analysis. (Goffman 1968; author and anon 2014). 'New' psychosocial theory, unlike most social psychology, tries to advance a psychoanalytical and social structural analysis.

Moving, now, from thinking about what psychosocial studies is not, to what it is, a little background may help. The development of what one might distinguish as 'new' psychosocial theory over the last two decades is building on the venerable tradition laid down by the mid-twentieth century European critical theorists, to integrate psychoanalytical theory with forms of social theory, for example structural sociology and/or critical psychology, to better understand the human subject in context, and to apply this to research and practice.

The roots of this work are squarely European, and mired in the concerns with social justice, liberation, truth, understanding of the nature of violence and persecution, the nature of human 'depth and surface' and repression: the modernist agenda of the twentieth century Frankfurt School, which itself draws on the European Psychoanalytic Tradition of, e.g., Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein and also, importantly, the political significance of Marxism. Contemporary psychosocial studies still has at its heart Adorno and Habermas's seminal attempts to elucidate human nature and social injustice with sociology and psychoanalysis. Insistence that such concerns as racism and other forms of social conflict can only be understood as the product of individual affect and social structure (e.g. in Adorno's The Authoritarian Personality in 1951**)** has continued to be a major driver in psychosocial thinking and research (Clarke 2005; Gadd and Dixon 2010).

'New' psychosocial theory has largely been developed in the last 2 decades initially driven from the disciplines of sociology and social policy, particularly by those theorists such as Hoggett who came to academia from backgrounds of political activism, and then added psychotherapy and/or psychoanalysis to their repertoires (Hoggett 2015). Similarly, some practitioners in areas such as

mental health, whether qualified as social workers, psychologists or therapists bought this experiential sensibility into the world of theory when they moved into the academy (Frosh 2015).

Building psychosocial theory is an undertaking of those concerned with crossing or blurring boundaries and distinctions, and challenging some false dichotomies (see below) on the way: for example practice or theory; sociology or psychology; the internal or the external; the knower or the known.

Building psychosocial theory is also an ongoing project; unfinished and in the process of identity formation: hence definitions tend to be contingent and temporary. And, equally, because psychosocial theory is currently being written and developed, the boundaries of what is considered in the field and what its scope is, are still flexible. Psychosocial theory has mainly been driven in England and the USA, though other European nations have also developed the area. The Norwegian Psychoanalytic Society for example, supports psychosocial initiatives, (e.g. Oslo, 2011, 'Nationalism And The Body Politic Conference') and the psychosocial organization 'Psychoanalysis and Politics' was co-founded by Norwegian scholar Dr. Lene Auestad.

In the UK there is now a psychosocial network, a psychosocial sub-group of the British Sociological Association, and a 'Learned [academic] Society' called The Association for Psychosocial Studies, whose launch at The British Library in 2014 confirmed academic legitimacy and disciplinary acceptance. Core academic journals have been founded with the USA, such as *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* (Palgrave Macmillan) and the online *Journal of Psycho-Social Studies*. Moreover, undergraduate, post graduate and professional programmes have been developed to teach psychosocial approaches at a significant number of

universities and institutes, for example: the Department of Psychosocial Studies at Birkbeck College, London (e.g. MSc. Psychosocial Studies); The University of East London (BA Psychosocial Studies).

Perhaps as important as the teaching of psychosocial studies is the written contribution of psychosocial theory to understanding contemporary social life. In the UK a substantial body of psychosocial literature and research has been generated from within the disciplines of sociology, criminology, psychology, social policy, psychoanalysis, social work and politics/social activism over the last decade or so. (e.g. Murray Parkes 2014; Froggett et al 2014a; Hollway and Jefferson 2012; Trevithick 2011; Gadd and Dixon 2010; Layton et al 2006 and Hoggett 2002).

The paper has now said a little about the history and growth of psychosocial studies: what it is not and what it is; where it is developing and for what purposes. Two further points may help with clarity before the discussion moves on. As much as anything definitive can be laid down about this fluid and developing set of ideas called 'psychosocial theory', it is its very specific notion of the subject- the person at the centre of the study – that psychosocial theory differently defines from other disciplines.

Psychosocial theory, then, theorises the human subject and their lived experience at the ontological centre of social theory, thus:

> *Subjects whose inner worlds cannot be understood without knowledge of their experiences in the world, and whose experiences of the world cannot be understood without knowledge of the way in which their inner worlds allow them to experience the outer world* (Hollway and Jefferson 2012, 4).

And the discipline overall, as the web-site of the Association of Psychosocial Studies captures, can, for now, be considered as:

...characterised by a) its explicit inter or trans-disciplinarity, b) its development of non-positivistic theory, method and praxis and c) its orientation towards progressive social and personal change (APS 2014)

What psychosocial theory offers overall is a 'rich' version of the subject in context: important for thinking sociologically, one might argue, as well as crucial for understanding the social work subject. The paper now goes on to consider a little of sociology and social work's far less compatible history.

Sociology and social work theory

Developing appropriate theory for social work is inevitably a complex process. (Parton 2000) Part of the difficulty here lies in the relationship between social science subjects and social work and the drive within social work to claim a body of theory as its own. In reality it has had, since its rejection of psychoanalytically based theory four decades ago (see above), mainly sociology, along side positivist psychology, to draw on in the construction of this. It has also, - though differentially in different countries- eschewed engagement with 'high' theory and attempted to substitute social policy and/or human rights discourse at its foundations. From anti-discriminatory practice to neoliberal managerialism, trends towards a-theoreticism are in evidence over the last decades (Trevithick 2003). It is worth noting though that even given this, the influence on all social theory by 'the French turn' (Foucault, Lacan, Bourdieu) is also evident in social work. (Parton 1994; Houston 2002; Garrett 2007; Irving 1999; Powel 2001; Bracher 1993).

Within social work courses exist academics who are formerly and currently sociologists, social policy writers and psychologists, who necessarily draw on their own disciplines for constructing, teaching and publishing theory for social work. The complex relationship between social science theory, social work theory and practice can bemuse or frustrate social work students. Disjunctures between lectures/lecturers and students can be the outcome.

Fook, for example, illustrates such a stance from her own background. Describing her experience of social work academia she comments

> *'What I found was ...a world in which it seemed that male academic theorising sociologists tried to teach female practising social workers better social work by converting them to a world of theory (e.g. Althussar*) (Pease and Fook 1999, 5).

And if social work struggled with structural sociology, structural sociology struggled with social work even more –especially psychodynamic or psychoanalytically informed casework, as noted above. Particularly from the 1960s, after sociology moved more firmly into the social work academy, and into social work practice, such work was heavily criticised for its perceived exclusion of any interest in power or inequality, and was seen to be too concerned with what is in people's heads to the exclusion of their material situation or concerns: the old but ongoing critique (Langan and Lee 1989).

Marxist sociologists' critique of social work - as essentially an instrument of state control: pathologising, labelling, and further oppressing the already oppressed - dismissed its practices. Social workers more grounded in practice issues could see little chance of this Marxist critique realistically or usefully informing an alternative everyday practice, particularly in statutory contexts.

Fook's quote, above, also hints at a more structural struggle under the surface of the academic and disciplinary:- that of gender. The surge in interest in sociology as a discipline in the 60s and 70s lead to far higher numbers of qualified male sociology graduates, some of whom had backgrounds in trade unionism and activist politics, and a proportion of whom became social workers and social work academics. Some came with no particular respect for or understanding of a feminised 'caring' profession that worked mostly with women and children. That social work as a discipline has felt variously patronised by, and excluded by sociology and sociologists is not just a historical position but in many countries still very much the case. Italy for example has had an ongoing struggle, not over yet, to establish social work in the academy, and still appointments of senior academics for social work courses are far more likely to be male theoretical sociologists than women from social worker practice backgrounds (Campanini 2004).

And in the UK, sociology still seems to carry a certain ambivalence in relation to social work- certainly not making much of the connection. The current British Sociological Association website is keen to point out the links between sociology and more practice based subject specialisms- but social work is not on the list.

> *'Now, as well as being an academic subject in its own right, sociology forms*
> *part of many other programmes such as business studies, medical training,*
> *geography and environmental science and the newer sports and health*
> *sciences'* http://www.britsoc.co.uk/WhatIsSociology/SocHist.aspx

However, it also seems to be the case that problems and differences between sociology and social work theory tend to receive more attention than their, equally evident, congruence and mutual interests.

Part of the difficulty of connecting up sociology and social work certainly always was status hierarchies and political incompatibilities, and no doubt there were theoretical issues to. However it seems clear that some of the theoretical incompatibilities may have related to *the kind* of sociological theory being utilised. In reality there always were always alternatives to Althussar's particularly uncompromising form of structuralism (Elliott 1994). For example, it seems evident that theoretical strands from sociology such as labelling theory, deviance and connected concepts like 'moral panics' were more than helpful as aids to understanding the positioning and situation of service users as well as the potential role of the profession itself in exacerbating or minimising such forms of 'social damage' (Cohen 1973**)**. Forms of social psychology such as symbolic interactionism, as typified in Goffman's work (discussed above), were also of considerable use. Such work can also usefully inform social work across a range of practice/theory dimensions. E.g. 'Asylums' (1968) consideration of the erosion of identity within social and organisational structures is enduringly helpful for social work.

Although Fook, above, is critical of one aspect of one particular branch of Marxist theory, the ubiquitous social work language of 'emancipation', 'structural inequality' and 'critical social work' is inescapably elided to Marxist sociology in general, and Critical Theory in particular (Pease and Fook 1999).

Sociology, particularly when it was able to theorise both the subject and the society/social context in which they are located, as with the former example, could be of immense use in educating social workers, and educating them in ways that sociology was more comfortable to 'own'.

The social science curriculum for undergraduate social workers at the author's university draws on mainstream sociology, e.g. Giddens and Bourdieu, Foucault, Hochschild and Beck, to increase the students' understanding and how to apply it. It is not, staff here would argue, possible to understand the social work subject without understanding the sociological concepts of power, agency, identity, risk, emotional labour and cultural capital. In the curriculum though, it is sociology taken with the psychoanalytical ideas (e.g.   from Bowlby, Winnicott and Lacan) - psychosocial studies, as this paper is arguing- that allows the social science curriculum to more closely address the needs of practitioners.

To the concepts listed above, attachment theory, object relations theory and ideas such as desire and identification are also crucial to even begin to make sense of the complexities and potential of not just the person but the relational social work encounter. To offer an example: a theory-into-practice student lecture and seminar session, on the subject of 'ill-being', focuses on three central issues: shame, loneliness and trauma. For the former, identity sociology, criminology and political theory contribute, psychology, sociology and critical psychology help with 'loneliness'; trauma is theorised from within psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, as well as the humanities and again political theory. In each case work from psychosocial theory allows an integration of ideas, whilst putting the subject at the centre of the work (e.g. Jimenez and Walkerdine 2011; De Jong Gierveld et al 2006; Eyerman 2013). Practice issues are under-pinned by these interwoven, psychosocial ideas. Shame, loneliness and trauma are core to many social work practice encounters.

From the end of 1980s to the present, sociology and social work have both developed more shared interests (for example: identity, culture, anti-racism)

However, in contradiction, they have also entered a new impasse. The attempt to integrate the post-structural 'turn' in sociology, or even the more vague tenets of 'postmodern' theory, has been highly problematic. How can social work (and indeed emancipatory sociology) maintain fundamentally modernist principles such as emancipation, structural inequality and (single) identity politics, in the face of such a sustained critique of humanism and an insistence on relativism and linguistic determinism, for example? The paper now considers the further rifts between sociological theory and social work theory inflicted by post-structuralism and post-modernism, and how psychosocial theory can provide an alternative.

Post-structural dilemmas and psychosocial resolutions

The conditions of academic production over the recent decades have ensured that sociological trends move quickly through to social work theory texts and teaching. This was the case with post-structural sociology (and the less disciplinary specific theories termed, loosely, postmodern). Careful critiques were also quick to emerge, and the multi-dimensional hybrid of 'critical social work', still containing elements of the other two strands, has been the most prevalent legacy (Fook 2004; Adams 2002). This section of the paper is concerned with the problems of merging post-structural sociological theory-particularly some of the anti-humanist work of the late twentieth century French and American theorists, with social work thinking. A range of themes presenting dilemmas for social work theory and practice might illustrate this point. For example, conceptual dualism (particularly the 'agency versus determinism' dichotomy). Here though the example of psychosocial theory 'arbitrating'

between sociological theory and social work theory in the realm of identity is now discussed. This seems to be an important area of confusion and practice paralysis that insistence on postmodern theory introduces. Strands of postmodernism theorise the subject (identity) as fluid, in process and organised within contingent narratives of personhood. By assuming this version of identity, then the answer to the question 'can people change?' for example, must be 'yes'; personal change, even self re-invention, is inevitable within this free play of multiple possible versions of selves. As well as postmodernism, recent social work theorising deriving from Giddens' structuration theory also suggests a rather voluntaristic version of welfare subjects who *choose* life-worlds and stances within flexible personal politics (Ferguson 2001).

On the one hand this is helpful. Social work students are starting from an understanding of the welfare subject (any subject, including themselves) as having the ability to change. However, implicit in postmodern identity theory are also aspects which are incompatible with social work's theoretical, ethical and practical position.

Postmodern theory 'decentres the human subject'; in other words deletes the notion of human authenticity and individual worth as a fundamental feature and starting point in understanding identity, thereby abandoning humanism. This not only challenges the notion of an authentic self (in the sense put forward by modernist theorists on whom social work draws, such as Karl Rogers) but also argues the impossibility of coherent and clearly defined identities, including the politically expedient identities of 'black' or 'woman'. Practitioners are left to try and work out for themselves, for example, why, if identity is fluid and there is no essential self, the same kinds of problems often surface year after year in the

same individuals and groups of people. And what is the point of, for example, of instigating a women's consciousness raising group if there is no such reliable category as 'a woman'?

It seems that the body of sociology simply does not transfer well into social work theory and less still into practice situations. Psychosocial theory offers an alternative.

Psychosocial theorising offers a version of identity which can explain both the ability to *and* the reluctance to change, with some notion of possible movement also implicit. Hoggett, for example, suggests that:

> *...our capacity to be a reflexive agent is often constrained by the difficulties we have in facing our own fears and anxieties. Some ideas and experiences are just too painful to think about, even with the support and solidarity of others... (2001, 42)*

Using psychosocial theory offers the opportunity to understand people as having multiple strands to their identities, some of which may be in conflict. Using this version, failure to change can be understood as the product of internal battles and ambiguities. This is not suggesting identities which are essential, unchanging or rational, which is a familiar critique of modernist identity theory. Nor is it arguing identity is primarily self-chosen or available for infinite revision, as strands of postmodern theory tend to suggest. Psychosocial theory suggests that identities might be messy and in process, but they do have authenticity, depth and value.

Importantly too, psychosocial theory understands people as existing within stratified social structures and complex but unequal power relations. Class, poverty, gender and other social structural determinisms, are also part of

identity and impact on agency. The version of personhood offered by psychosocial theory is of someone struggling, ambivalent, complex, passionate, having both internal and external forces and constraints. In other words it offers a 'rich' version of the subject about whom knowledge, including self-knowledge, can only ever be partial and incomplete. For social workers, an issue such as 'why does this domestically abused woman still say she loves and wishes to return to that abusing man?' can be understood as demonstrating powerful ambivalence rather than wilful self-delusion or lack of self-esteem. The 'social' half of the psychosocial paradigm also connects this thinking to the social politics of gender oppression and the social construction of romantic love.

An engagement with psychosocial theory in sociology offers possibilities for informing new social work theory, which is coherent, comprehensible, and useful. This goes beyond the notion of simply applying knowledge from the academic discipline to the practice of social work, in the problematic way identified by e.g. Parton (2000), but offers a complex, process-driven account of the fundamentals of identity, interpersonal relations and ways of knowing (an epistemology and ontology) with which students and social workers can make sense of the whole experience, including their location within it. Sociology, including structural sociology, is of considerable importance to psychosocial theory. Sociologists concerned with the emotional/affective world of the human subject are invaluable. For example Bourdieu's muscular social structuralism, concerned with power, oppression, and practices in research and social justice, has also continued to be vital to inform the 'social' of psychosocial thinking. Bourdieu's concerned with the mechanisms through which society seeps into identity has a resonance with psychosocial concerns in itself, but also

combined with, for example, Kleinian object relations theory, is particularly useful for thinking psychosocially about fundamental issues (such as 'social suffering'), which are also central to social work. (Bourdieu 1999; Grenfell 2008**;** Author and anon. 2008; Walkerdine and Lucey 2001; Alford 1990**)** Understanding identity, and its social context, psychosocially is in itself of use to social work. What is of equal benefit, this paper now goes on the argue, is the reflexive nature of the discipline of psychosocial studies: that it questions the separation of the knower from the known- in other words situates the subject of knowledge production within their own theories and arguments and makes 'the expert' consider their own role in their expertise: as the paper now discusses.

Psychosocial theory and the theorist

Interestingly, the biographies of many of the key figures in the psychosocial movement in the UK and the USA at present include beginnings in social work, community work, clinical psychology and/or political activism. Currently, although these academics are to be found in departments of social sciences and/or social work, practice is still of paramount importance to the psychosocial: practices of activism around, e.g. climate change (Weintrobe 2013), community conflict (Hoggett 2009), and therapeutic practices within and outside the clinic (Scanlon and Adlam 2013). Socially engaged research might also be classed as a practice (see below, and also e.g. Mayo et al 2007; Walkerdine and Jimenez 2012) as might some forms of art practices linked to social engagement (Froggett et al 2014b). It is precisely the capacity of psychosocial thinking to dissolve boundaries between the 'academic' and the 'lived', the personal and the

political, and also the knower and the known that extend the possibility of 'bridging' sociology and social work.

In the same ways as contemporary psychosocial research methods - as outlined by e.g. Hollway and Jefferson 2012- insist on examining the inter-subjective relationship between interviewer and interviewee, the psychosocial approach overall highlights the relationship between the knower with the known. In other words how one studies a/the subject (what it means to be homeless or unemployed, a child in a working class family: a black older person in a traditional family, etc.) and perhaps even *why* we are looking at it, is also a product of what is in our heads, hearts and lives as people constructing knowledge. The researchers and theorists who are building the psychosocial knowledge base here are also implicated. They are not pretending to be objective or all- knowing, but accepting that personal experiences and leanings, class backgrounds and psychic worlds, impact on perceptions and discussions, the choices as to what counts and how it is written about it.

e.g. a text such as 'Growing up girl: psychosocial explorations of gender and class' discusses 'use of self' in research practice

> *' Our class background has remained a central issue in this part [data analysis] of the study … For example some of the middle class girls initially evoked our envy…Using our own subjectivity and experience of being envied by members of our families was part of the process of understanding envy in a more useful way and being able to use it as a tool with which to examine the psychic aspects of the lives of the middle class girls…' (Walkerdine et al 2001, 84)*

The academics, and the reader, are part of the process of trying to understand

the 'lens' through which their findings are viewed- the commitments and loyalties and affiliations and damage they bring to this study of the class contexts of girls growing up.

Such reflexivity is an intellectual tool, for the social sciences, offering the capacity to identify and examine, rather than sweep under the carpet, the investments and perspectives bought to scholarly endeavour. In social work it was ever thus, for students and practitioners, and never more so than now. As Froggett et al succinctly comment

> *It is because our students need critical contextual awareness and understanding of intersubjective relations at the practice interface that the classical social work concept 'use of self' (Wosket 1999, Ward, 2010 Baldwin, 2010) is useful.* (Froggett et al 2014a, 3)

But such thinking needs to be rigorous and analytical. Sociologically developed theories in relation to the self/identity, for example cultural capital (Bourdieu) or recognition (Honneth), 'pure' relationships (Elliott) and ontological insecurity (Giddens), autobiographic narratives or fateful moments (Giddens) offer conceptual frameworks for understanding self (and others). The sociology of identity, of the emotions, the family and so on, as well as the continued interlocking of sociology and psychoanalysis, facilitate both enhanced rigour and greatly extended breadth in examining who we are and what we bring to social encounters. The 'psych' element also offers frameworks and concepts for considering the 'beneath the surface' of the reflexive itself- e.g. object relations, splitting, anxiety (and envy). Psychosocial studies, then, legitimates reflexivity as a rigorous, theoretically coherent engagement with knowledge as a subjective and relational process.

Shared knowledge practices: psychosocial research

Following on from above, then, it is perhaps worth drawing this discussion towards a conclusion through the shared (between sociology, social work and psychosocial studies) concerns of research. Research methods and research practice have become core topics in psychosocial approaches; for example in terms of methodology, such as Hollway and Jefferson's 2012 revised *Doing qualitative research differently: a psychosocial approach* (alluded to above) and *Researching beneath the surface* edited by Clarke and Hoggett in 2009. As we cited above, research-based studies drawing on such approaches have also contributed to how we are able to think psychosocially about the lived experiences of, e.g. (as above) class and gender, unemployment and 'shame', and these original studies have helped to develop the field: for example, Hollway's forthcoming (2014) study: '*Knowing Mothers/Mothers' Knowing'* and '*Gender work and community after de-industrialisation: a psychosocial approach to affect'* by Walkerdine and Jimenez in 2012. Social problems and social practices have also become of core concern to psychosocial theorists, with racism providing a particularly rich focus, in for example, Clarke's 2003 *Social Theory, Psychoanalysis and Racism*, and Gadd and Dixon's 2010 *Loosing the race: Thinking psychosocially about racially motivated crime.*

The final section of this paper will consider an extended example of a specific piece of social intervention that serves to highlight and epitomise the arguments advanced herein. It focuses on the psychosocial approach 'at work' as it were: drawing from the dissolution of the boundaries between sociology and social work, practice and theory, structure and agency, research and reflection, and

actions the power to address struggles and problems within the world. In other words it is an example of 'the psychosocial' in practice ameliorating the perceived tensions in relation to sociology and social work.

The Centre for Psycho-Social Studies at UWE, Bristol, (2000-2012) was commissioned by the English funding body The Economic and Social Research Council to undertake a research project called 'Negotiating Ethical Dilemmas in Contested Communities'. This was part of the funders 'Identities' stream, and allowed the researchers to focus on the identities of communities and workers within them.

Hoggett et al. undertook to use specifically psychosocial methodology to initially investigate the ethical commitment of community workers to their practice. They considered workers in the field of, loosely defined, community regeneration, and their, what they came to describe as, 'psychic roots of public commitment' (2007). They found mixtures of class and gender positions, the internalization of senses of 'outsiderness' and 'otherness', inextricably inter-twinned with political beliefs and social opportunities in developing and sustaining their work in and for the community. The psychosocial methodology employed- accessing the life stories and the 'under-the-surface' stories of their sample, lead the researchers to argue, essentially, that the profession is well-served by a strong commitment from its workers, and by workers who have been able to transform their family and/or individual identifications as sources of creative agency.

' *So we come upon a final paradox. The identifications which fix and position us also provide us with the resources for their transformation' (Hoggett et al 2007)*

From this research, with its central concern of 'transforming identity', some of the team went on to look more closely at such 'regenerating' communities

themselves:- the deprived, mainly white working class communities on the fringe council estates of a medium sized provincial English city. Angry often, bitter and expressing high levels of grievance with the world, these communities had mainly cast themselves as victims of 'the system', whose needs and rights had been passed over, the argued bitterly, in favour of 'immigrants', black people, social security 'scroungers', 'thugs', single parents and other contemporary 'demons'. The team's psychosocial understanding of this community's grievances as grief, unmourned and 'nursed' and unrelinquished, was insightful in comprehending its static nature – how community work interventions had foundered on a resistance to change. Similarly to 'truth and reconciliation' initiatives in e.g. South Africa, the need for grieving, mourning, settling accounts and forgiving (a psychosocial bereavement model based on Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia, 1917) was understood as a pre-requisite for repudiation of a passive victim position. With support for grieving the relinquishment of grievance was possible, and a capacity for moving on established (Hoggett et al 2007).

Conclusion

The above example can perhaps stand in as a coherent definition of 'the psychosocial', in that it encapsulates the various dimensions and processes that one might wish to say about it: a useful beginning to a summing up. To continue, then: what this paper has argued, is that psychosocial theory is in the process of a re-emergence. It considers where it is being generated, and in what contexts. It looks at what it is not, as a discipline, and what, though still in process, it seems to be. It outlines its tradition in critical theory, and in social work. Having set out

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the context, the paper then focuses on some of the history of the relationship between sociology and social work theory, mentioning difficulties and areas of mutual support. The focus then shifts to specifically looking at some of the tensions in using post-structural and postmodern theory in social work, and why psychosocial theory offers more productive alternatives. Finally the paper looks at two further areas where psychosocial thinking is useful to social work: reflexive identity, and in informing appropriate models of research. Through use of social work and sociological examples throughout, the paper has argued that social work and sociology need psychosocial studies for a productive and dynamic integration, offering renewed possibilities and injecting creative energy into the relationship. It has attempted to establish that psychosocial studies is a discipline that can offer social work a set of concepts and analytical tools that are genuinely useful.

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