Psychoanalysis outside the clinic: Interventions in psychosocial studies

Stephen Frosh


What happens when psychoanalytic knowledge leaves the clinic? What is to be gained from these interventions, and can psychoanalysis itself benefit from an application outside the context in which it originated? Those are the questions Stephen Frosh raises and attempts to answer in his nuanced and accessible new book. Writing from the relatively young discipline of psychosocial studies, he provides support to academics who still feel the need to justify their use of psychoanalytic concepts. Through a detailed exposition of existing scholarly endeavours, the book illustrates how these concepts can be applied to issues of a transindividual nature. At the same time, the book tries to rein in those enthusiasts who believe that psychoanalytic knowledge, with its emphasis on affect and the unconscious, holds the missing elements to a Grand Theory of the Social. While the question of whether or not psychoanalytic knowledge can be fruitfully applied to nonclinical settings perhaps remains justified, one is led to think, however, that dismissing the contributions of the likes of Adorno, Marcuse, or, more recently, Žižek would mean an impoverishment of the academic field.

One way of reading Psychoanalysis Outside the Clinic is therefore as a review of previous efforts to transcend the original analyst–analysand dyad. Each chapter looks at a different area and subdiscipline that has experienced an influx of psychoanalytic ideas, including literary studies, social psychology and ethics. Frosh makes no secret of his predilection for the Lacanian school but avoids giving a skewed portrayal by beginning each chapter with a reference to the discipline’s founding father, as well as giving space to a discussion of the contributions by followers of the British school of object relations and, notably, by Laplanche. The last chapter is dedicated to a survey of the role and impact of psychoanalytic thought on Frosh’s own field of psychosocial studies, with a detailed account of the methodological and theoretical challenges it poses, in addition to a description of its critical potential.

The author always remains critical of the dogmatic tendencies of psychoanalytic thinking, which at times appears to want to install its mode of viewing the social world as a new ‘Master Discourse’ (Parker, 2008). Like Parker, he is also wary of the increasing infiltration of psychoanalytic discourse into everyday thinking. This development effects a domestication of its ideas, a ‘blunting of the subversive edge of psychoanalysis’ (p. 185). Instead, its major strength lies in its ability to disrupt and question what overly commonsensical theories seem to have clarified already. This belief in psychoanalysis’ capacity to unsettle and to unravel meaning has its origin in a Lacanian mindset, according to which meaning is always contingent.
However, just as analysts should resist imposing their interpretation on the analysands’ statements, scholars wishing to apply psychoanalytic concepts should withstand the temptation of delivering their conclusions from a position of authority, of being ‘in the know’. When engaging with such issues as the social construction of identities, psychoanalytic concepts might thus lead researchers to question the binary thinking that guided the initial investigation, by showing how the ‘internal’ and the ‘external’ are always implied in each other. According to Frosh, one of the consequences of engaging with psychoanalytic ideas is having to relinquish a sense of certainty in one’s ability to access fully the forces governing subjectivities.

The author is also hesitant regarding the abilities of psychoanalysis to show a way out of existing – and often destructive – social relations or exploitative power structures. What psychoanalysis can offer, however, is to outline ‘patterns of desire in which subjects become stuck’ (p. 186), that is, to go some way in explaining individuals’ investments in certain subject positions despite ‘evidence’ of their irrationality. It is here that psychoanalysis retains an ability to disrupt the ideology of the intuitive, natural and commonplace.

Readers looking to find suggestions on how to integrate the psychoanalytic approach into more traditional qualitative research methods, however, should look elsewhere. Frosh has written extensively on methodological issues, but the book’s main concern lies in a reflection on the possibilities and impossibilities of psychoanalysis outside the clinical setting. While more transdisciplinary research is encouraged, and indeed forms the basis of Frosh’s own field of psychosocial studies, this recommendation should not inspire an ‘anything goes’ mentality. The treatment of psychoanalysis as a Weltanschauung, in fact, undermines its critical capacities. Thus, if a successful dialogue between disciplines is to take place, a significant degree of reflexivity must accompany engagement with research. Reflexivity entails questioning the premises and political structures on which a discipline is founded, as well as the researcher’s own investment in the theory and the way this shapes the final interpretation.

Frosh himself sets the example by asking how his affinity for Lacan may have informed his view of what psychoanalysis can and should accomplish outside the clinic. In fact, the Lacanian ideas of a radical negativity at the heart of the subject and the impossibility of society might not sit well with those (particularly Kleinian) thinkers who place emphasis on recognition and the possibilities of reconciliation. He also alludes to the critical connection between the historical context in which the discipline was founded and the emergence of individualism.

One nevertheless gets a sense that more examples of other disciplines’ effect on psychoanalysis would have been useful, if only to avoid yielding to its ‘colonising tendencies’, which the author aptly describes. There is recognition of the roles of feminism and of queer studies in modifying some of psychoanalysis’ notions of what is ‘normal’ and what is pathological. There is also a discussion of how literary studies turned the table on Freud by treating psychoanalysis like any other text that can be interpreted. Ultimately and perhaps naturally, given the author’s theoretical background, however, the book aims to show how other disciplines can profit from an exposure to the psychoanalytic perspective.
Psychoanalysis Outside the Clinic is not likely to convert those sceptical of the discipline’s tenets; and, though it might disappoint those searching for an impassioned argument for the explanatory potency of psychoanalysis, it nevertheless provides an indispensable guide to existing interdisciplinary efforts. Employing a laudably clear style of writing, Frosh takes the reader across a wide expanse of ideas and fields of study, pointing out fruitful as well flawed endeavours on the way. The book leaves one full of anticipation for what Stephen Frosh and his colleagues in psychosocial studies will contribute to the existing debate on the place of psychoanalysis in social theory.

Reference


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Lacan at the scene

Henry Bond


At a public lecture a few years ago, a Lacanian psychoanalyst declared that the only way Lacan’s theory would gain widespread popularity in this country was if someone made a TV series about a detective who was a Lacanian psychoanalyst. The premise with which Bond opens Lacan at the Scene is very similar: ‘What if Jacques Lacan – the brilliant and eccentric Parisian psychoanalyst – had left his home in the early 1950s in order to travel to England and work as a police detective? How might he have applied his theories in order to solve crime?’ (p. 1).

Another recent book – Bruce Fink’s (2010) anagrammatically titled The Psychoanalytic Adventures of Inspector Canal – is testament to the fact that other Lacanians have asked themselves the same question. After all, Lacan himself chose to open his Ecrits not with a dense theoretical treatise of the kind for which he is known but, rather, with a commentary on a detective novella: Poe’s The Purloined Letter.

This does not mean in any sense that Bond’s book is unoriginal: quite the opposite. Many readers will find its practical application of Lacan’s theory refreshing, given the paucity of published clinical material in the Lacanian literature. But Lacan at the Scene cannot be taken in the light-hearted way that some previous Lacanian readings of other ‘texts’ (films, literature) can. Indeed, given the book’s disturbing content – reproductions of crime-scene photographs of murders committed in England between 1955 and 1970 – and the difficulties Bond reports in conducting his research in the National Archives at Kew, it is impressive that this book even made it into print. Bond is careful, however, to be sensitive to his subject matter and to avoid any hint of the callous voyeurism or noir pastiche that is a familiar cliché of the detective fiction genre.