Transdisciplinary Tensions and Psychosocial Studies

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Abstract

The notion of the 'transdisciplinary' stands in critical relationship with interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary studies. One way of making the distinction is to see it as lying between approaches to complex research or practice issues that (1) draw on the expertise of different disciplines acting solely within their separate areas of expertise (multidisciplinarity); (2) draw on the expertise of different disciplines working together on a shared problem (interdisciplinarity); or (3) are antagonistic to disciplinary boundaries and instead promote dissolution of them in the search for freer and broader critical work. Understood in this light, transdisciplinarity is not necessarily the 'holistic' approach it is sometimes taken to be; rather, it can be radically deconstructive and fragmenting, unsettling received wisdoms and provoking tensions between different traditions of conventional knowledge

Psychosocial Studies is a new terrain for interrogating the 'social subject', at odds with both psychology and sociology and drawing on a range of deliberately 'trans' spaces, such as postcolonial theory, queer theory, psychoanalysis, feminism and relational ethics. Whilst of necessity deploying established methodologies for its empirical work, notably interview based qualitative methods but also ethnography and literary analysis, it often disrupts them through its suspicion of the disciplinary 'agreement' that has carved out the areas of the 'psycho-'and '-social' in conventional ways. In particular, it foregrounds reflexivity as a mode of research action, in an attempt to radically destabilise knowledge. This creates numerous excitements and problems, as this paper will try to show.

Disciplines

Disciplines are reassuring things. Not only do they organise knowledge in

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such ways that we can see its shape, identify what is a problem and what a solution, and measure up what is undiscovered against what is understood; but, sociologically, they also provide us with ways of conceptualising who we are and what we belong to. They mark out career trajectories and professional identities and in very many cases also pay political dividends, notably for those disciplines classed as 'science'. Once we have a discipline to belong to, we are *disciplined* in the simple Foucauldian sense of being made subject to a field of discourses that govern our behaviour and our thinking, and the rules of self-scrutiny that we apply to ourselves. We are bounded, with all the comfort this offers (in the psychoanalytic sense, we find containment); but of course the price that is paid is that we are constrained too, disciplined to find only some things meaningful, sure of ourselves in one area, but very hazy about what lies elsewhere.

From the perspective of being disciplined in this way, there is plenty of work to do in any one disciplinary area, so much that we might wonder why we would ever want to step outside it. Becoming expert in psychology or sociology or economics or politics or philosophy is a hard enough task, brutally hard, and there is no end of what Kuhn (1962) termed 'problem solving' to be undertaken within the terms and practices of 'normal science'. Once we stray outside the safety of these disciplines, with their agreed methodologies and underpinning philosophies and their canonical texts and accepted bodies of data, we lay ourselves open to the problems faced by all amateurs and migrants: we do not really belong anywhere; we have no safe space to stand upon; we are stranded in a language that we try to use, but we miss its nuances, its idioms, we pronounce its 'w's as 'v's. We may try to import ideas from outside our discipline into it in order to enrich the discipline or criticise it, but can we really be confident that we understand these ideas fully? And what about the sniping from both sides, from the inhabitants of the discipline itself, who resent or – more likely – ignore the upstarts who think that some other approach is better than the time-honoured one that has paid dividends so far; and from the exporting discipline, say philosophy or social theory, whose exponents have spent a career developing hard-fought esoteric arguments based on principles with centuries of history behind them (Nietzsche is enough to frighten me, but what if it all reaches back to the Greeks?) and who will always, it seems, see deep flaws in the way an intruder uses them? Their professional status – perhaps even their job – is, after all, under threat if these ideas are too easily purloined by others. The world is a complicated place and it is impossible for anyone to have comprehensive knowledge of it; expertise, therefore, can only be in a limited area, and diluting it by moving too far away from our training and area of competence is a way to introduce error and misunderstanding, and perhaps also professional

panic.

Under these circumstances, why do funding bodies and universities profess a commitment to interdisciplinarity, and why do academics try to make a career out of it? Given the safety offered by our borders, why deliberately obscure them? The flyer for this conference articulates the normal rhetoric very well in relation to social science, putting it in terms of the need to gather together to address issues that are too complex and wide ranging to be the possession of any one discipline.

> *The interconnectedness of our world has never been more apparent. In a challenge to sociology, and other social sciences, contemporary researchers attempt to explain the complexity of colliding social worlds by embracing methods and theoretical approaches that push beyond the traditional boundaries of academic disciplines. Interdisciplinarity as a concept may serve a multiplicity of goals in research, policy and practice. It may include the need to answer complex questions and broad issues, beyond the scope of a single discipline, as well as the need to achieve unity of knowledge in a fragmented world. Arguments for interdisciplinarity appeal to notions of pulling together to solve common problems, which has resonance in the practice sphere with calls for multi-agency working and efficiency.*

This is a very alert statement, which I think deliberately embodies both the argument for this kind of 'interdisciplinarity' and the doubts we might have about it. On the one hand, there is recognition of the undeniable 'interconnectedness of our world' and the implication of this – that any one discipline will not be able to provide the answers to 'complex questions and broad issues'. This is an epistemological argument from the nature of social reality – the real interconnectedness of things – that demands a certain kind of response from researchers: pushing 'beyond the traditional boundaries of academic disciplines.' On the other hand, the blurb astutely recognises a political imperative: 'the need to achieve unity of knowledge in a fragmented world', the notion 'of pulling together to solve common problems.' This is less obvious; indeed, I have to say that it should provoke our suspicions. What is the 'need' to 'achieve unity of knowledge in a fragmented world'? Is this a psychological need, a political one or a scientific one? What kind of 'common problems' require 'pulling together' to 'solve' them; who or what defines these problems in the first place, and why exactly should we seek to solve them? Is this because they genuinely need solving, for otherwise they will cause

destruction and distress, or is it because they trouble someone, somewhere, and embalming them as the corpse of 'problem solved' would make those people feel safer?

In my own interdisciplinary field, psychosocial studies, I have long wondered about the impulse to find unity of knowledge and understanding – an impulse that is also present in the hard sciences, and was characteristic of a certain 'theory of everything' energy that pervaded the first part of the twentieth century. I have a number of cautions about this. First, if the world is genuinely 'fragmented', interconnected perhaps but also complex, multilayered and contradictory, then the search for 'unity of knowledge', whilst not intellectually vacuous, is at best strewn with dangers. The main one is simplification, which in itself might be a necessary evil in order to achieve a measure of control over impossibly complicated variables. That is, we simplify tactically in order to gain a small amount of understanding, from a specific position, to at least know one thing properly in a world of fissuring confusion. This is in fact one justification for *disciplinarity*: no claim is being made for universal truth ('unity of knowledge'), but rather for a small truth understood in a very specific way, which may be temporary but at least has utility until it is superceded by something else. The problems with simplification, however, are many. For instance, the insistence on one way of thinking – whether by researchers themselves or by those who pick up and popularize their work – results in an impoverished and ideological rendering of things that can be so restricted as to be actively wrong, or at least misleading. If such ways of thinking gain dominance, they can distort everything from social policy to people's reflexive self-understanding. We are beginning to see this in the growth of brain science and, along with it, molecular genetics. The point of course is not to suggest that the brain is not a relevant object of study, but rather that the reduction of everything (from education to love) to brain function is literally a reduction, a shrinking of perspective, which also serves the interests of the individualism that is pervasive as the dominant ideology of contemporary culture. That is to say, it is hard enough to imagine a social world as it is, and it is made even harder to do so when the social sciences are limited to itemizing brain functions.

Narrative Coherence

I think this impulse towards coherence in research is a fundamental underlying ideological stance that can be seen at work not only in 'conventional' social science, but in much critical work as well. I want to spend a few minutes here on one example that I have worked on for a while, which I think reveals something going on in critical psychological work and

psychosocial studies that threatens to blunt their edge. In the course of this, we can see a certain kind of interdisciplinarity in action that could be destabilising and provocative, but is also rather easily appropriated (colonised) to perpetuate disciplinary assumptions. But let me start with some more thoughts on the temptation towards coherent and simplifying assumptions.

Over several years, I have been interested in narrative and narrative analysis, having been introduced to it first in a practical way when I was doing family therapy as a clinical psychologist in the NHS. One visible issue there was exactly how to move families away from the idea that there is just one unified solution, a 'unity of knowledge in a fragmented world.' That often seemed to be precisely what the families were suffering from – the belief, sometimes enforced with psychological or even physical violence, that there is a single way of interpreting experience, including the experience of being in family relationships. Much systemic family therapy at that time was geared to disrupting this belief, and this was codified by the so-called 'narrative therapists' (e.g. White and Epston, 1990) in quasi-Foucauldian terms to recognise the existence of multiple narratives directed at articulating the same experience from different relational perspectives. So we had dominant narratives, akin to dominant discourses, and subjugated narratives which we would aim to bring out. So far so good, but translated into normative therapy and also into narrative research of certain kinds, this has become a way of thinking about narrative as an organising principle that trumps the analytic categories that might actually undermine the claim to coherent narrative at all. This takes a little explaining, which I tried to do in an article called *Disintegrating Qualitative Research* (Frosh, 2007). The central point is that even though many people working with narratives know full well how precarious and contradictory they can be, there is a constant pull (which I am tempted by as much as anyone else) away from this awareness and instead towards a kind of celebratory re-presentation of the 'one story' that sums everything up. For example, much narrative analytic work takes some kind of text that has originated with a person – perhaps in an interview or a diary – and subjects it to an analytic process that breaks the text down in order to rebuild it in a more convincing way and make of it a more coherent story. This story can have various tendrils and connections; indeed, it is a regular and important function of qualitative research to uncover broader contexts which give meaning to the story, for example by reference to societal discourses, or maybe even to the Freudian unconscious (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, 2003). But a story it is nevertheless, something with shape and direction; for instance, in Labov's familiar framework, it is structured into an abstract, an orienting passage, a complicating action, an

evaluation and a resolution (Labov and Fanshell, 1977). In the course of this, the agency of the participating subject is restored: he or she is made into a speaker, with a point of view, someone positioned in discourse but nevertheless there, speaking to us from the page.

What can be wrong with this? On the face of it, it precisely coincides with an ethical and political act of resistance to the totalising tendencies of globalisation and the continually growing cultural hegemony of western capitalism. It offers a 'voice', as people usually say, to marginalised individuals and groups whose views and experiences would otherwise be discarded – and, indeed, much qualitative work has had this goal and has consequently focused on groups usually pushed out of view through racism, sexism or other modes of oppressive practice (e.g. Mana, 1995). In many ways, the focus on restoring agency has an excellent philosophical and political grounding in Habermas' (1968) notion of emancipatory practice, which whilst embedded in a discussion of psychoanalysis has resonance for all work that purports to rescue the truth of the subject through attending to and repairing broken narratives. Indeed, it might be suggested that the coalescing of hermeneutic approaches in psychoanalysis and narrative approaches in qualitative research around the notion of emancipation is a significant theme in contemporary social science (Frosh, 2006). In psychotherapy and in narrative research, the act of interpretation aims to provide for participants the opportunity to seize hold of lost or hidden meanings and re-own them.

One can argue then that just as individuals benefit in the psychotherapeutic domain from being able to speak their stories and have them reflected back in a way that enables them to be understood and owned, so in the political domain it is precisely through the coherent articulation of subjugated narratives that oppressed groups become empowered. The histories of feminism, gay and lesbian rights and black consciousness are clear examples here. Nevertheless, there is something about this turn to narrative that is disconcertingly familiar from a long series of attempts to re-define identities, attempts that very often result in stronger versions of the same. The problem is that the more convincingly this is done – the more effectively the story is articulated – the more it seems that the 'truth' of the subject is being pronounced upon, when what the various critical 'transdisciplines' (a term to which I shall return) have demonstrated, is that there is no such truth at all.

I take as my textual source here a brief critique of the trend towards 'narrativism' in psychoanalysis (as in other social sciences) from Jean Laplanche (2003), who argues that making a coherent narrative can be seen

as a *defensive* process. Summarising, Laplanche makes a point that can be taken as a comment on the relationship between psychoanalytic therapy and psychoanalytic understanding but which also has broader implications for the integrating tendency of much social scientific work.

> *The fact that we are confronted with a possibly 'normal' and in any case inevitable defence, that the narration must be correlated with the therapeutic aspect of the treatment, in no way changes the metapsychological understanding that sees in it the guarantee and seal of repression. That is to say, that the properly 'analytic' vector, that of de-translation and the questioning of narrative structures and the ideas connected to them, remains opposed in every treatment to the reconstructive, synthesising narrative vector. (p.29)*

It may be consoling, therapeutic even, to have sense made of one's mystifying miseries, one's uncertainties and partial understandings. It can indeed be empowering: we are made into agents; we are subjects with something to talk about. But this misses an important point, one that has been central to modernist as well as post-structuralist and postmodern sensitivities and concerns: this is the idea that the human subject is *never* a whole, is always riven with partial drives, social discourses that frame available modes of experience, ways of being that are contradictory and reflect the shifting allegiances of power as they play across the body and the mind. There is no 'unity of knowledge', and the pursuit of this chimera is a way of not coming to terms with this fact. Freud clearly knew this and articulated it in what Laplanche (1997) calls psychoanalysis' 'Copernican revolution' whereby the subject is no longer capable of being taken as the source and repository of psychic life. This might indeed be why Freud (1926) names such an impossibly wide interdisciplinary realm as necessary to the training of psychoanalysts:

> *If — which may sound fantastic to-day — one had to found a college of psycho-analysis, much would have to be taught in it which is also taught by the medical faculty: alongside of depth-psychology, which would always remain the principal subject, there would be an introduction to biology, as much as possible of the science of sexual life, and familiarity with the symptomatology of psychiatry. On the other hand, analytic instruction would include branches of knowledge which are remote from medicine and which the doctor does not come across in his practice: the history*

> *of civilization, mythology, the psychology of religion and the science of literature. Unless he is well at home in these subjects, an analyst can make nothing of a large amount of his material. (p.246)*

What postmodernism adds here is the notion that the 'decentring' produced through this dizzying array of analytic perspectives can never be reversed through somehow returning agency to the subject, because the riven subject cannot be seen as a whole –there is, simply, no external point from which the true story of the subject can be told. Laplanche's (2003) formulation is pretty exact here: the 'properly analytic vector' is 'that of de-translation and the questioning of narrative structures and the ideas connected to them.' In other words, however much, for therapeutic and strategic reasons, one might want to make a coherent narrative out of a subject's chaotic account, *don't believe a word they say.*

Transdisciplinarity and Disruption

Let us take stock for a moment. I have been suggesting that whilst the drive towards interdisciplinarity is understandable and in many ways commendable, it also raises false hopes which are themselves reflections on the difficulty of holding in mind what the conference organisers correctly term 'a fragmented world'. Interdisciplinarity is a response to the demonstrable inadequacy of single discipline approaches to this complex fragmentariness, 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 and fissiparousness by clinging on to the image of a theory of everything 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. 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 new 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) 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. For example, psychoanalysis (and, for that matter, psychology) 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. Its vocabulary of 'primitive' mental states, for instance, is bound up with assumptions about the contrast between 'savage' and 'civilised' humans, the former assumed (by Freud, 1913) to be similar to civilised children and – more importantly – to be fixed in a stage that is precursory to full psychological being. 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 an openly psychoanalytic text that subtly reworks Lacanian ideas in this other context. But it does mean that psychoanalysis cannot simply stand its ground and speak about the postcolonial subject; it also 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*: and it is precisely the jostling for supremacy that makes an integrated position seem possible, when in actuality it 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.

This is also one strand in some work that I developed with Lisa Baraitser, exploring how psychoanalysis is being used in psychosocial studies itself. In many respects, psychoanalysis and psychosocial studies go together well. The concern of psychosocial studies with the interplay between what are conventionally thought of as 'external' social and 'internal' psychic formations has resulted in a turn to psychoanalysis as the discipline that might offer convincing explanations of how the 'out-there' gets 'in-here' and vice versa, especially through concepts such as projection, internalisation and identification. In addition, through its valorisation of fantasy and its interest in the ways in which irrationality permeates the social sphere, psychoanalysis,

both in its object relational and Lacanian forms, has re-emerged as a favoured, if fought-over element in social theory. All this is true and I would certainly defend the deployment of psychoanalysis in the psychosocial terrain, seeing it as a way not only of filling out the lacunae of psychosocial studies but also potentially of enriching psychoanalysis itself. But in our paper on the topic (Frosh and Baraitser, 2008), which stimulated quite fervent debate, Lisa Baraitser and I argued that many researchers have been so keen to draw on psychoanalysis to provide a credible backdrop to their thinking, that they have treated the psychosocial research environment as if it is a psychoanalytic clinic. In so doing they have neglected the radical deconstruction of many psychosocial assumptions that psychoanalysis can perform – as well as misrepresenting psychoanalytic concepts themselves. My favourite example here is the notion of 'countertransference', which in the clinic usually refers to a specific unconscious response elicited in the analyst by the unconscious material coming from the patient – by, that is, the transference. When used in research (e.g. Hollway and Jefferson, 2005), countertransference rather easily slips into referring to any emotional reaction that the researcher might have to the research participant. This is simply not the same thing, and it normalises the psychoanalytic position to make it so. More generally, there is a temptation to ascribe people's motivations to their 'unconscious' as if the unconscious is a thing, a source of meanings. At its most radical, in for example the Lacanian forms that have influenced postcolonialism and much feminism, psychoanalysis assumes that the unconscious does not exist as such at all, but is instead a term given to the tendency of the subject to subvert itself continuously, to fall into a process of speech that has no clear central term. My point here is simply that once concepts such as 'countertransference' or 'unconscious' are removed from their specific context of emergence, they lose their bite and are likely to become a kind of transliteration of what is already known.

It is in this context that I am interested in the idea of *transdisciplinarity*, understanding it as a term for approaches that are antagonistic to disciplinary boundaries and instead promote dissolution of them in the search for freer and broader critical work. This is not in the service of a fantasy that a more unified understanding will come about if only we can dispense with the artificial boundaries of existing disciplines; it is rather a way of approaching understanding that regards all knowledge as unstable and provisional (not, I realise 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 often acknowledge by describing themselves in terms of their class, race and gender attributes. It is, rather or in addition, a destabilising mode of reflexivity that asks questions about each statement of understanding; that recognises the radical reflexiveness of subject positions that means that as information is produced, so the situation changes; and – most of all – that comprehends how research participants really are subjects, with the agentic capacity to use the research situation 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.

This is all pretty abstract, I know, so I want to conclude by returning to the issue of narrative and to my paper in *Theory and Psychology*, *Disintegrating Qualitative Research* and the processes that went into writing it, which I reported on for the *Qualitative Methods in Psychology Newsletter* (2008). I expect that the origins of this paper have parallels with many other origins. Having to present something to a conference (on 'Qualitative Methods and Marginality', held at the University of Leicester in 2006), I decided to have a go at doing something 'marginalising', disrupting the position I had taken in previous work and making use of the occasion to rethink, to decentre my own centredness or at least upset some of my own apparent certainties. There were several strands to this, of which two are most important. Over some time I have been concerned about being misunderstood in some of my writing on 'things that can't be said' (Frosh, 2002), which has been quoted in some places as a kind of paean to mysticism, despite my explicit protestations to the contrary. My idea in this work was to suggest that language itself produces its exclusions, either because there are too many ways of saying something – more than can be articulated – and hence when one way is embarked upon it closes down the possibilities of others; or because some events are *abjected* in the sense of being excluded from language because they are too terrifying, disgusting or traumatic. There is nothing mystical in this, yet the mere mention of an area 'beyond' language seems to generate spiritual excitement in people geared up to find 'another realm' outside the real. So I wanted to find a way of restating the 'outside language' idea in a way that would close of the possibilities of mystical

extrapolation.

The second strand of self-reinvention is about narrative. Although I have always been drawn to a deconstructive approach to narrative analysis, party through an interest in Lacanian psychoanalysis but also because of exposure to some rather hard-line and dense micro-analytic procedures (Emerson and Frosh, 2004), my work and that of my students quite often drifts into a rather lyrical mode of humanistic narrative reconstruction. The appeal of the human story is just too great, and the political urgency attached to giving people 'voice' in research is too immediate, to allow us to break everything into bits and not try to put it together again. However, I *want* to be more rigorous about the procedure of breaking things into bits, which to me is more attractive than what I see as pursuit of the rather imaginary hope of integration. In psychoanalysis, it marks the difference between what Philip Rieff (1966) long ago termed the 'analytic attitude' and the therapeutic or 'ecstatic attitude', with the former always being superior to the latter because of its principled refusal to develop a positive image of how the human subject has to be. In psychosocial thinking, the key issue is to reveal the signifying patterns that have the subject in their thrall, without reverting to a researcher's tale of how it all fits together.

Needless to say, the attempt failed pretty miserably. The conference paper was a success, I think because of the lyricism of its language and the power particularly of the interview material (from an interview conducted with the novelist A.S. Byatt – Frosh, 2004) that was used as my analytic example. The extract I chose was so emotive that it told its own story, and the point of the paper was lost. The first *written* version of the piece was just as much a shambles. The theory worked fine, and was recognised as such by the reviewers (although one, of course, wanted to take me up on the ground of mysticism). But the analysis of the interview extract simply proved my point at the expense of my argument: something lyrical and re-narrativised appeared, which as one reviewer noted left me, or the reader, coming 'full circle and ending up facing backwards'. What is the point in arguing for the dis-integration of narrative analysis if one then produces another beautiful story?

So, chastened but encouraged by the basic enthusiasm of the reviewers, I tried again, this time with a more formal, deliberately alienating mode of analysis, and felt much happier with the outcome – a careful tracking of the rhetorical and emotional devices used by my speaker as she moves through her account of her childhood memory of her father coming home from the war. Rather than interpreting what the narrative was *about*, I thought I had shown how it *worked*. But then I gave the piece to a colleague of mine. Her email was pretty tough and to the point: yes, beautifully done, very nice, but is this

not yet again a better story, does not each turn of the screw simply leave us with more elegant expertise, a spiralling rearticulation of the story, then of how the story is told, then of how the telling of the story can be understood? That is, can one ever get away from the appropriation of narratives?

I don't think it is possible really to answer or escape from this point, but I did realise something else. Perhaps the problem lies in the need to produce, for an academic journal, a completed piece, one which draws together its argument at the end. Perhaps one way of dramatising the importance of producing openness in narrative is, simply, to leave one's narrative open. And perhaps we cannot do this on our own, because despite the postmodern theorisation of the multiplicity of subjecthood, we all strive so hard for coherence. So my solution appeared in the screen in front of me, and I used my colleague's email, only lightly edited, for the counter-voice that concludes the piece. I think it works: just at the point that it looks like the paper will conclude with a piece of narrative closure, a making-sense-of-it-all that belies the argument that there is no such sense to make; just at that point 'another voice' is heard that disrupts things once more, that is appreciative yet querulous, serious yet subversive. This was the best I could do to keep the thing moving, to keep the argument open, provisional and uncertain; and it needed someone else to do this with, against and for me – in the best tradition of a kind of psychoanalytic exchange. 'You think you have it sorted? Think again.'

My feeling is that we might use this as a paradigm too for where the potential radical productivity of interdisciplinary studies might become realised. Some of my best students have jumbled together ideas that do not seem to belong in the same space: Foucault and psychoanalysis, systems theory and narrative analysis, feminist philosophy, literary theory and psychosocial studies. In each case, where it has worked it has left their research in disarray, a state that is prone to produce anxiety in everyone, student and supervisor alike. Yet I take this disarray and anxiety as an indication of something healthy: if we feel less anxious when we are held in a more integrated state, then perhaps increasing anxiety can (under some circumstances – I do not recommend trying this on your own at home) signify a willingness to take risks, to fall into contradictions that reflect the contradictory nature of the social reality we find all around us. That is to say, preserving the unsettledness of experience requires a concatenation of different disciplinary voices and the breaking down of boundaries to allow them to be heard. It is unlikely that beautifully tonal music will be created as a consequence, but it is surprising how enjoyable discord can be.

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