COVID-19 emerged in the public consciousness in March 2020. While the framings and responses to the emergence of this virus have been very diverse globally, the pandemic has had a profound impact on sociality and relationality. It has brought into relief and exacerbated long-standing inequalities, vulnerabilities and exclusions, raised new questions about how social protection might be figured and how to respond to emergent immunitarian logics and the remaking of community in different contexts. How might we frame, narrate and represent the experience of COVID-19 in the myriad contexts in which the pandemic has unfolded?

In the long and ongoing aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, this special issue focuses on critical contributions to thinking through the relations between psychosocial research and the pandemic. It specifically aims to provide a space for researchers of the psychosocial, as they labour to engage with, think through and re-describe the world in a range of contexts that are being reconfigured through novel viral relationalities. Psychosocial research is particularly well placed to reflect on the conditions of possibility of social worlds in times of crisis. This is due to its commitment to transdisciplinarity, allowing it to draw on perspectives from across the humanities and social sciences, to social critique, and especially to the central location of reflexivity and ethics in psychosocial work (Frosh, 2019a). In Veena Das’ (2020) timely intervention, the ethical conundrums that have emerged in COVID-19 times re-centre the importance of context and location as individuals and communities have had to face unprecedented dilemmas, while also finding ways to speak of ‘grief, death, regret’ as well as (in)justice. We consider these emergent sensibilities to be absolutely central, as psychosocial researchers have continued to do their work, challenging discourses of ‘business as usual’.

It has been pointed out that the current crisis is in fact not a novel experience for those who have endured previous major disruptions, as well as for those for whom living in ‘crisis mode’ is the experience of the ordinary and the everyday. There is a rich and textured archive of analyses of living and dying in social contexts marked by profound precarity (Han, 2018; Das and Han, 2015). Precarity here conjures up perspectives that, drawing on political economy, place emphasis on labour conditions
against a background where social protection is absent, inadequate or in the process of being revoked. However, precarity is increasingly understood to encompass a more fundamental ‘common condition of ontological precarity’ (Han, 2018: 331). In the context of the deadly virus and the homicidal inadequacy and perversity of some governmental responses, this precarity meshes with a highly politised version of ‘grievability’. As articulated by Judith Butler (2020), grievability distinguishes between lives worth preserving and others that are discardable; those lives that would be grieved if they were lost, and those that do not seem to count. Grievability is not in itself a statement about grief, but rather about mattering, in the sense of ‘Black Lives Matter’, a movement itself precipitated into prominence partly through the demonstrable social discrimination performed by the virus. ‘To be grievable’, writes Butler (2020: 59), ‘is to be interpellated in such a way that you know your life matters; that the loss of your life would matter; that your body is treated as one that should be able to live and thrive, whose precarity should be minimized, for which provisions for flourishing should be available’. Yet these provisions are not available for all people, and the inequality in grievability – in the valuing of lives – is deeply racialised. In this broader sense, then, the pandemic has meant major disruptions to a range of activities, has added uncertainty and a renewed sense of risk, but it has also clarified some things. It has exacerbated social inequalities and has had effects that can be distinctly mapped along pre-existing social distinctions and forms of vulnerability.

Exposure to the virus is socially structured and not merely biologically given, thus yielding notions of risk that are imbued with old and new socially situated significance and which attach themselves to particular constituencies, rapidly redrawing the lines between those living with and those dying with the virus. These are immunitarian dynamics that continuously redraw distinctions in and through the social body as well as individual bodies, foregrounding porosity and interdependence in light of COVID-19 viral relationalities (Figure 1). Immunity, as a medical and juridico-political term, indexes an organism’s capacity to resist the nefarious effects of an infectious entity and the protection or exemption from a legal obligation. As such, it has provided a rich theoretical lexicon for thinking through social and political dynamics. As Haraway (1989) and Martin (1992) noted, popular and scientific framings of the immune system against the background of the AIDS crisis in the late 1980s and early 1990s marked the material-semantic constitution of complex apparatuses of bodily production in late capitalism. The emergence of the post-Fordist body (Martin, 1992) – that is, a body bearing the imprint of the shift towards an increasingly specialised, highly mobile, flexible accumulation that superseded Fordism’s emphasis on homogeneity and steady repetition in the production line – reached deep into the cell, taking immunitarian dynamics and battlefields to the cellular level, mirroring the then emergent operations of global capital and flexible accumulation in the operations of immune systems fighting AIDS: ‘Imagery used to describe the immune system in the body strongly evokes these descriptions of the operation of global capital …’ (Martin, 1992: 127). The visions of ‘bodies under siege’ popularised in the times of AIDS documented by Martin made reference to disorientation in space and time and appealed to understandings of the body as nation states permanently under attack at different scales. These analyses and debates acquire new significance in the current predicament, as COVID-19 relationalities once again invoke immunity as...
social theory (Esposito, 2008; 2011) to grapple with the biopolitics of the unfolding pandemic, the redrawing of boundaries of inclusion and exclusion and the negotiation of such processes in social dynamics and the subjectivities in terms of emerging ‘disease imaginaries’ (Strong et al, 2021: 345). While COVID-19 might not quite mark ‘the end of intimacy’ (Strong, 2021), in its wake the embodied memories of other pandemics – Ebola, HIV, SARS, avian flu (H5N1) – have recast COVID-19 as an allegory of other emergencies (Strong, 2021) that unfolded in other times and places – in some instances in one individual life – raising questions about the politics of contagion and conundrums of proximity in newly imagined and negotiated socialities.

**Critique, relations and ethics in the emergency**

The impact of COVID-19 on research has been very marked. In some disciplines, notably biomedical ones, it has advanced activities and escalated funding in the scramble for vaccine development. In others, it has hampered work and blocked access to research sites, producing psychosocial crises for researchers that mix together their frustrations and concerns about their work with personal anxieties and experiences of medical, financial and social suffering. Loneliness and isolation have predominated for many young researchers, propped up by online connections but also discovering their limits, turned back upon themselves in ways that occasionally facilitate reflection, but more often seem to block thinking and mute creativity. The pandemic has demanded a response from researchers that means it has to be ‘folded into’ research processes, projects and aspirations: it is not only that it cannot be ignored, but also that it has become the huge shadow over everything, and in many instances also the driver of radical reconsideration of research priorities. This has pushed into prominence the
idea of ‘life in the emergency’, with that ‘emergency’ radiating out from the virus to include (and sometimes, it should be said, occlude) the other emergencies that face us: the climate emergency, the emergency of racial injustice, the divisions between people who are in poverty and are most precarious and affluent people who have benefited, financially at least, from the closing of the world. Part of our invitation to contributors to this special issue was to consider the personal impact of COVID-19 in relation to psychosocial research, and we can see this running through most of the final pieces, in which the personal voices of the authors come across as seeking new orientations for their work, methodologically and substantively.

One of the defining characteristics of psychosocial studies has been its ‘critical’ approach, in two related senses. The first is that it is interested in the conditions of formation (historical and political as well as intellectual) of the discourses it confronts; that is, it refuses the idea that there is anything foundational or pre-given and instead seeks to examine the genealogy of the materials with which it engages, including psychosocial studies itself. The second sense of ‘critical’ respects the general affiliation of psychosocial studies to a ‘progressive’ mode of thought dedicated to the use of ideas and research to promote human flourishing. In the context of the pandemic, both those aspects of critical thought need to come into play, in a generous and searching way rather than in the cynical form of conspiracy theory that has so conspicuously flourished. An issue here is that the overwhelming magnitude of the crisis as well as the proliferation of information that is mostly speculation and is often framed by suspicion and deliberate lying, has made it hard to get one’s bearings: in the middle of the storm, what can be relied on to offer true, or at least safe, navigation? Moreover, as the most urgent dimensions of the psychosocial come into view – those emergencies mentioned earlier, for instance – what aspects of genuinely critical thought can be mobilised to delineate and analyse them? In the articles collected here, we have encouraged authors to take their own ‘cut’ into this complex of forms, drawing on the range of methodologies available to them and present in psychosocial work – psychoanalytic, ethnographic, archival, social psychological, speculative. While the whole notion of ‘critique’ may be under a kind of erasure, given the swirling fog that shrouds everything at present and the sense also that some intellectuals have been seeking counterintuitive positions precisely in order to be seen as ‘non-dupes’ of common sense, we also believe that igniting analytical and critical capacities and maintaining a rigorous position of self- and other-questioning is crucial if we are to use the COVID-19 crisis as a moment of learning and a spur to emancipatory action. We regard all the articles published in this special issue as contributing to this project; as in Paulo Beer’s piece, perhaps it is precisely in the disruptive opposition of ‘truth’ to ‘knowledge’ – that is, to claims of mastery – that the critical capability of psychosocial studies might be found. In Gustavo Sánchez’s article the pandemic is conceptualised as an ‘imaginary dislocation’, which engenders an auto-ethnographic critical reading of acts of symbolic identification tied to the unfolding of subjectivity, but also to the conditions of possibility of critique – and metonymically, the University.

A central, albeit contested, feature of the psychosocial studies project is ‘relational ethics’, the set of questions that revolves around the conditions of human–human and, increasingly, as the pandemic has shown, human–non-human encounters. Despite a number of polemical interventions, these questions continue to be vital in the wake of COVID-19 (Bratton, 2021). In our call for papers, we framed them as: How have relationalities shifted and changed, including relations to research objects? What
vulnerabilities have arisen and how are the parameters of encounter, ethics and care being reimagined? How are we keeping hold of the world as COVID-19 rewrites boundaries of sensoria and the ethics of touch? These questions have turned out to be core components of most of the articles, ranging from differentiations of touch and the ethics of neighbourliness in Ruth Sheldon’s (Sheldon, 2021) article through the problematics of teletherapy in Leanne Downing’s, (Downing, 2021) to the disturbance of bodily immersion in archival research in Lemonia Gianniri’s (Gianniri, 2021). It may even be that Tom Fielder’s and Lizaveta van Munsteren’s (Fielder and van Munsteren, 2021) analysis of the ‘reanimation’ of the plague metaphor in psychoanalysis and literature points towards a relational approach to the non-human world involving some way of understanding the virus as an agent that is a psychosocial force as much as a biological one, not just in the sense of responding to human interventions (including miscalculations and neglects), but also as something with which humans have relationships. The promised ‘new normal’ will, we are told, include having to find ways to ‘live with’ the virus; this appreciation of how we live in a shared world is hard won and probably easily lost, but perhaps this time the exigencies of the emergency will allow some of it to be retained. Additionally, of course, the issues of care and vulnerability have been prominent in the crisis; how, for example, the simple acts of touch that usually reflect emotional closeness and support have had to be replaced by gestures of care premised on the avoidance of touch and proximity, clearly leaving an ache behind. Viral relationalities are part and parcel of ethical projects of ‘living with’ through ‘making kin’ and acknowledging the complex conditions of interdependency and interconnection in (Haraway, 2021 in Bryant and Wallenberg, 2021). Lemonia Gianniri’s (Gianniri, 2021) evocative writing on her archival work in this special issue is a kind of commentary on this, as is Ruth Sheldon’s (Sheldon, 2021) ethnography; but everyone, in their different ways, is struggling to articulate how relationality can be ethical in a context in which contact is desperately needed, yet can also be lethal.

Writing and re-presenting

We invited contributions for this special issue taking different literary forms, partly in recognition of the variety of ways in which psychosocial studies is couched but also because of our awareness that writing itself might reflect the conditions of the pandemic. We asked: How are writing strategies changing to respond to intensity, numbness, overcrowding or isolation? What experimentations with genre are possible, when, for example, the distinctions between social realism and science fiction appear newly tenuous? It is clear from the resulting articles that all authors are taking space to reflect on their own experiences and positions, some, such as Gustavo Sánchez (Sánchez, 2021), in an especially acute way as the pandemic challenges their sense of themselves as academics and researchers as well as raising concerns over safety, anxiety and hope. This produces a personal form of writing that is anyway characteristic of psychosocial studies but intensified here as the stressful realities of the COVID-19 environment impact on researchers. The problem of ‘concentration’ looms large, with questioning of the purpose of work (does it matter any more?) as well as the difficulties posed by agitation and worry, especially for younger academics working in countries far away from their original homes. The modes of writing that appear here are all reflexive, even though they range across different degrees of autobiography or autoethnography and different levels of experimentation as the authors attempt to capture something of the experience of
working in lockdown and to make sense of it. For Matthew Martinez (Martinez, 2021), writing is a transformative practice, which, when mobilised to venture across genres and disciplinary conventions, can constitute a leap ‘into the open’. Writing here is figured as a method of hope and mode of articulation for the otherwise. Lemonia Gianniri (Gianniri, 2021) similarly figures ‘the haptic’—that is, touch—as the method for sensing, connecting and engendering alternatives in the context of COVID-19 strictures and foreclosures. Perhaps the term we used earlier, ‘intensity’, is the one that is most fitting: the writing is not only personal as well as scholarly, but also urgent, seeking to capture something difficult and disturbing without reducing it or turning away from its effects.

Finally, we are faced with the essentially deconstructionist as well as psychosocial question of what ‘remains’ and what to do with it. After the fall—that is, after the pandemic, if such a time ever fully comes—what are we left with? Motifs of grieving and loss, of anxiety and precarity will clearly dominate the collective reality and imagination, but how we look at this as psychosocial researchers is an open question. In many respects, psychosocial studies is well prepared, as it has always had its ‘melancholic’ side, related to analyses of gender formation and postcolonialism as well as histories of trauma and ruminations on recognition and acknowledgement (Frosh, 2019b). Those aspects of psychosocial research that have emphasised collectivity and ethical relationality can also be seen as part of an agenda towards ‘rebuilding’ in the sense of looking for new linkages that go beyond the rhetoric of conviviality or ‘otherness’. Nevertheless, the disruption of social landscapes and the emergence of critical thinking on a planetary scale, including ecofeminism and afropessimism as

Figure 2: Domodossola train station, 10 June 2020. Photo by Silvia Posocco.
well as climate emergency activism, represents a new level of challenge to thinking, theorising and writing psychosocially (Figure 2). In this small special issue, there are obvious limits to what can be articulated, but there are also some seeds visible. The disruptions of received ‘knowledge’ by something more truthful, refuting denial, is one psychoanalytic way of looking at it; ‘returning’ us to the reformed ‘ordinary’, as Ruth Sheldon (Sheldon, 2021) suggests, might be another. Indeed, images of return abound, from the ‘negationism’ unpicked by Paulo Beer (Beer, 2021) to the recovery of the plague metaphor as a physical reality descried by Tom Fielder and Lizaveta van Munsteren (Fielder and van Munsteren, 2021), and perhaps also even in Lemonia Gianniri’s (Gianniri, 2021) seeming nostalgia for the touch and breath of the archive. Maybe we really do need to go back in order to move forward, this time acknowledging the damage that has been done.

Conflict of interest
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

References


