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## Emotional experience plus reflection: countertransference and reflexivity in research

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## **Emotional experience plus reflection: countertransference and reflexivity in research.**

### ABSTRACT

Psychoanalysis is informed by a radically alternative theorisation of knowing from the cognitive one that underpins dominant research methodology. Here, I show how psychoanalytic approaches to knowing, captured in the idea of transference-countertransference dynamics, can inform qualitative research methods and expand the practice of research reflexivity. The approach is summed up as emotional experience plus reflection, based on Wilfred Bion's theory of thinking. I trace parallels in the history of the concepts of reflexivity and countertransference and then provide brief examples taken from recent research using psychoanalytically informed interviewing and observation.

### Introduction

Psychotherapy professionals and trainees have been quick to express their interest in my psychoanalytically informed approach to qualitative research methodology and psychology because they are trained in the use of self in knowing their clients (technically the countertransference) and this provides access to a research paradigm consistent with their professional training. The research I describe here<sup>1</sup> developed a psychoanalytically informed research paradigm and transformed my practice of reflexivity.

### Reflexivity

Reflexivity entered the vocabulary of research methodology as part of a critique of the twentieth century's dominant positivist methods based on scientific principles. In the scientific approach to Psychology 'objectivity became one of the central defining principles (...), its purpose to achieve value neutrality and knowledge untainted by the preferences of those who produce knowledge'<sup>2</sup>. Its creation of a binary between objectivity and subjectivity, which cast subjectivity as a dangerous intrusion of unreliable, emotional perceptions, has cast a long shadow, including in qualitative research.

Reflexivity is an attempt to recognise and use the inevitable participation of the researcher's subjectivity in the process of finding out. In qualitative research, it has opened the way for a research stance open to examination of blindspots and investments that risk rendering conclusions invalid. My work

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<sup>1</sup> ESRC-funded 'Identity Processes in Becoming a Mother', with Ann Phoenix, Heather Elliott, Cathy Urwin and Yasmin Gunaratnam.

<sup>2</sup> Hollway, W. (2013b) 'Objectivity', *Encyclopaedia of Critical Psychology*, ed. Thomas Teo. Dordrecht: Springer.

has used psychoanalysis to unpack what this use of subjectivity as an instrument of knowing involves, in theory and practice, not by importing a clinical view of countertransference wholesale but by a dialogue between research and psychoanalysis. I have come to recognise the value of Georges Devereux' claim, back in 1967 '... psychoanalysis is first and foremost an epistemology and methodology'<sup>3</sup>. It developed an account of an uncognised way of knowing that was not just about unruly emotions getting in the way of rationality but the relational communication of body-based emotional experience, past and present; in Ferenczi's words 'a dialogue of unconscious'.

#### Transference and countertransference inside and beyond the clinic

The terms transference and countertransference can create a mystique around some fairly basic ideas about the flow ('transfer') of unconscious dynamics between people and in groups, and this is partly because of how it slips between the clinical frame and the understanding of everyday dynamics.

According to Hinshelwood<sup>4</sup>, in the 1950s' the idea of countertransference changed from Freud's wish to excise such feelings by means of thorough training to being recognised as an important instrument of knowing about aspects of the patient when they could not bring these into thought or communicate them through language<sup>5</sup>.

The analyst's own transferences were also acknowledged: 'The analyst has his or her own feelings, just as the patient does'<sup>6</sup>. In other words, dynamics between analyst and patient include the analyst's transferences as well as their experiences of the patient's projections onto them. Like recent debates about research reflexivity, questions were raised about the status of the analyst's feelings: an invaluable guide to the patient's state of mind or an interference of the analyst's own personal difficulties, not worked through in his or her own analysis? As in research, there was concern 'that analysts might misunderstand or misuse the feelings aroused in them, to the detriment of their work'<sup>7</sup>.

Recognition that a researcher's transferences are a threat to clear-sighted knowing goes beyond the idea of subjectivity as a necessary alternative to objectivity by recognising also the danger of bringing with it prejudices and blinkered thinking. The distinction, hard-won in psychoanalysis, helps researchers not to throw out the counter-transference baby with the transference bathwater.

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<sup>3</sup> Devereux, G. (1967) *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioural Sciences*. The Hague: Mouton.

<sup>4</sup> Hinshelwood, R. D. (1991) *Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*. London: Free Association Books. p.255

<sup>5</sup> Heimann, P. (1950) 'On counter-transference', *Int. Journal of Psycho-analysis*, 31, 81–84. p.81.

<sup>6</sup> Hinshelwood, op.cit. p. 256

<sup>7</sup> Jervis, S. (2009) 'The use of self as a research tool', in S. Clarke and P. Hoggett (eds) *Researching Beneath the Surface*. (pp. 145–166). London: Karnac. p.146-7.

In the clinical setting with its therapeutic aims there may be an emphasis on the most archaic transferences, in which current emotional responses are seen to originate in relations with primary figures on whom the patient depended in early life, prior to symbol formation. Outside the clinic, it can be recognised that everybody has feelings, more or less available to conscious awareness, when confronted with emotionally redolent situations triggering previous experiences. If not reflected on, these are likely to be projected on to others as an ongoing part of everyday unconscious intersubjective dynamics. Since there is, broadly, 'no transference without countertransference'<sup>8</sup>, we are talking about an ongoing co-produced relational dialogue of unconscious. Psychotherapists will probably recognise the ubiquity and importance of such dynamics. Although the investigation of these origins for therapeutic purposes is not the aim of psycho-social research, which will be limited by its methods to feelings more accessible to thought, researchers can use psychoanalytic principles.

#### An example of transference-countertransference dynamics in psycho-social research.

Helen Lucey, June Melody and Valerie Walkerdine's<sup>9</sup> example of how they approached 'the messy and intractable issues of objectivity and reflexivity' demonstrates the importance of using transference-countertransference dynamics in psychosocial research. They outline 'three overlapping levels' in their analysis. The first is the 'face value' of the story; the second pays attention to inconsistencies and contradictions, etc, in the narration and reads these alongside the researcher's *recorded* emotional responses to the interview' (original emphasis) available in fieldnotes. Here, the feelings they note can indicate 'in the language of psychoanalysis, what transferences have taken place'. They then illustrate the third level of analysis through an example of a point in the dialogue when 'Helen's own unconscious anxieties got the better of her and forcibly made their presence known'. This point illustrates an observation by Roger Money Kyrle (who introduced the idea of normal countertransference), that the analyst's 'understanding fails whenever the patient corresponds too closely with some aspect of himself which he has not yet learned to understand'<sup>10</sup>. Here, there is initially 'too close a correspondence', between Helen Lucey and the family that she is interviewing (the working class parents who cannot envisage their daughter moving away; Helen as the working class daughter who would have felt trapped if she had stayed). The point the researchers emphasise is that 'Helen was not consciously aware of her own anxieties at the time and recorded nothing of this in her field notes'. These feelings were unconscious in the sense that they 'were unwanted, denied and/or felt to belong to others'. They then go on to show how this moment in the interview encounter revealed issues about working class intergenerational mobility (especially where daughters are concerned) that were central to the purposes of their project.

<sup>8</sup> Clarke, S. and Hoggett, P. (eds) (2009) *Researching Beneath the Surface*. London: Karnac. p.13.

<sup>9</sup> Lucey, H. Melody, J. and Walkerdine, V. (2003) 'Project 4:21. Transitions to womanhood: developing a psychosocial perspective'. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 6(3) p279-84, for these unreferenced quotations.

<sup>10</sup> Money Kyrle, R. 1956: 332, cited in Hinshelwood op. cit. p.258.

The research team in this example arrived at the point where inaccessible information became available to their research knowing by using the group to provide containment and space for thinking. This is theorised in Wilfred Bion's concept of containment: another mind – or several – enables a person to bring into thought the emotional experience that could not previously be processed. This is how I theorise and practice the use of self as an instrument of research knowing: emotional experience plus reflection.

Our research project about the identity changes experienced by women as they become mothers for the first time<sup>11</sup> used, in parallel, two complementary psychoanalytically informed methods, the Free Association Narrative Interview (FANI) method<sup>12</sup> and the infant observation method. Although the FANI method helps to elicit free associations, in experience-near accounts that afford psychological depth within particularised social settings, the method necessarily relies on language and elicits a mode of communication that is to a significant extent under conscious control. As with all interview-based methods, there is a tendency to generate an image of a rational, unitary, language-based subject. To address this weakness, we adapted the psychoanalytic, infant observation method, originally designed by Esther Bick at the Tavistock clinic as part of professional training for those working with children and families<sup>13</sup>. This enabled us to see aspects of identity that were less the product of conscious, intentional production through narrative and more inclusive of affect, unconscious intersubjectivity and embodied aspects of identity.

The observer's stance in infant observation is based on Bion's theory, notably the idea of making mental space for processing the emotional impact of the experience:

knowledge, theory, etc are set aside during the acts of observing and recording in favour of allowing the experience to make its impact ... a new concept of the observer is being employed ... here the truths which interest us are emotional truths. The observer cannot register them without being stirred ... correctly grasped, the emotional factor is an indispensable tool to be used in the service of greater understanding<sup>14</sup>.

Researchers' ability to notice the emotional impact of participation in a research encounter is only the start: in order to 'correctly grasp' the emotional factor, it must be thought about. Raw emotional experience must be reflected upon (digested, symbolised, processed; in Bion's<sup>15</sup> terminology, transformed into alpha function), if it is to be used helpfully. This principle governs group

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<sup>11</sup> See Hollway, *Knowing Mothers: Researching Maternal Identity Change*, Palgrave 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Hollway, W. and Jefferson, T. (2013) *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: Free Association, Narrative and the Interview Method*. 2nd ed. London: Sage.

<sup>13</sup> See Urwin, C. (Ed.) (2007) 'Becoming a Mother: Changing Identities. Infant Observation in a research project. Special Issue. *International Journal of Infant Observation and its Applications* 10(3).

<sup>14</sup> Miller, L. (1989) 'Introduction'. In Lisa Miller, Margaret Rustin, Michael Rustin and Judith Shuttleworth (Eds.) *Closely Observed Infants*. London: Duckworth, p.2.

<sup>15</sup> Wilfred Bion (1962) *Learning from Experience*. London: Karnac.

work in the infant observation seminar, which we adopted in the research project.

Reflection in the psychoanalytic sense is not just another word for cognitive activity; it requires keeping an open mind and that, as Bion's theory of thinking explains, is a supremely emotional process. Without reflection, responding to emotional impact can result in the indulgent exercise of one's preferred view of the world and imposition of one's own belief system in the service of a wished-for certainty that does not reflect the complexities of what is observed.

The combined use of emotional impact and reflection, supported and recursive where possible, became a fundamental principle of data production, data analysis and writing. Where possible we analysed data in groups; we used reflexive interview field notes and provided an unusual kind of supervisory support (neither academic nor therapeutic) for our main interviewer<sup>16</sup>.

#### A reflexive fieldnote

We applied this principle also to writing field notes ('reflective field notes') after each interview encounter. The following rich example is from Heather Elliott's reflection on a part of one of her field notes. In her second interview with Nila, she notes that it 'felt like an interview which had not worked' and continues:

However, I do note a moment when I am able to identify with her. Nila has left her baby at home and he is unhappy: her phone started buzzing almost as soon as we started. She checked her phone and ignored it; then took two or possibly three calls. For a while she looked like the essence of torn and juggling. Telling her story with an eye on the phone. I said she must take the calls and do whatever she needed to do. Writing up my notes I think of dropping off my younger son with his childminder this morning, the need to go and the need to stay. Never being entirely in one place. The feelings around getting calls from home on the mobile. These moments of connection help me recognise the challenges Nila faced ...<sup>17</sup>.

Psychoanalytically informed ethical principles are evident in this extract: a feeling of com-passion (literally 'feeling with') on Heather's part, enabling her to know something in an affective, not objectifying, way and also showing a reflective capacity that would help her to be clear about whose feelings belonged to whom and thus avoid confusing transferences

The challenge of registering emotional impact and remaining able to reflect upon it can be put into practice through Alfred Lorenzer's<sup>18</sup> advice to notice the provocation when encountering the data. This principle is illustrated in one

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<sup>16</sup> Elliott, H., Ryan, J. and Hollway, W. (2012) 'Research encounters, reflexivity and supervision', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 15(5), 433–444.

<sup>17</sup> Elliott, H., Ryan, J. and Hollway, W. (2012) op. cit. p. XXX

<sup>18</sup> The work of Lorenzer, German psychoanalyst and researcher, can be found in two English language special issues: *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* 15(3) and *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 13 (3).

case from the 'becoming a mother' research to reach into the terrain of cultural difference and guard against othering<sup>19</sup>.

### Coda

Through this brief introduction to psychoanalytically informed research, I hope to have opened a door to the account provided from the research in *Knowing Mothers* where full details provide an account based on principles that enable the researcher's reflexivity to be a rich and ethical resource and where the resultant knowledge can provide an appropriately complex picture of human subjectivity and everyday action.

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<sup>19</sup> Urwin, C., Hauge, M-I., Hollway, W., Haavind, H. (2013) 'Culture as a process lived through the person: Becoming a Bangladeshi mother in London'. *Qualitative Inquiry* 19 (6) pp. 470- 479.