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## Applying the 'experience-near' principle to research: Psychoanalytically informed methods

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This article is based on a talk given at the 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting, on June 12<sup>th</sup> 2007, of the ESRC seminar series entitled 'practitioner research and practice-near methods'. The topic was the use of the infant observation method and its application and potential for social work. The talk was originally entitled 'The potential of the observation method'.

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***Applying the 'experience-near' principle to research: psychoanalytically informed methods.***

**Key words:** experience-near, psycho-social research, psychoanalytically informed methods, objectivity, pace, intergenerational identification, embodied affect.

**Abstract**

This article is about how to preserve the vitality of the meaning conveyed to social science researchers by participants. I use the example of a qualitative, psycho-social project on the topic of how women's identities change when they become mothers for the first time. Psychoanalysis was used and adapted to understand both participants' and researchers' experience, and the relation of these to each other. I describe two psychoanalytically informed research methods, free association narrative interviewing and infant observation, and give examples of how, separately and together they can go beyond a text-based method and conceptualise identities in ways that avoid reproducing assumptions of rational, unitary, discursive subjectivity. In assessing how well the two methods worked, I focus my discussion on the observation method using four themes: dimensions of time, embodiment and practices, spatial sensitivity and multiple positioning and how knowing is accomplished in research.

**Introduction**

My pursuit of the potential of psychoanalytically informed research methods has been in the context of my disappointment with the qualitative methods available in social science research. I use the label 'psycho-social' for the developing alternative as a way of conveying that its central precept is to hold together an understanding of the workings of the psyche and the social without reducing one to the other. My reason for needing alternative methods applies well to social work research and practice, with their need to focus on the experiences of subjects who suffer and who care, and on psychological resilience and damage, in the particularities of the settings, past, present and anticipated future, as people engage with and make meaning out of their situations and actions. This is what I mean by experience-near. The dominant methods of research in health and social care have taken a quantitative and reductive turn, modelled on medical science and obsession with randomised controlled trials (Hollway 2001). Actual people are nowhere to be found in this kind of research.

Qualitative methods in the UK emerged in their contemporary manifestation alongside the 'turn to language'. In 1970's and 80's research, it was a radical move to interview people, often disenfranchised people, who had not been afforded a 'voice', and to avoid imposing an expert perspective through the way people's stories were interpreted. However, the sovereignty of text as the central material of research analysis has often led to the loss of something, a failure to communicate the aliveness of participants' experience<sup>1</sup>. Narrative analysis, especially in its biographical form and combined with a repeated interview format, has contributed to a perspective on processes over time, but 'interview-based research is an imperfect way of studying behaviour. The existence of two accounts does not in itself resolve the problem that interviews are constituted through stories that are told about life, rather than the life as it is lived' (Thomson 2007: 572). This paper is about the search for an approach that reaches beyond and below the text.

There are many features involved in trying to preserve the aliveness of participants' data throughout the research process. A mundane example from my own research experience illustrates one single point. Earlier in my career, following conventional expectations, I would transcribe audio-recorded interviews with participants and never return to the audio record. Unlike some traditions, such as conversation analysis and some forms of discourse analysis, I did not use a set of transcribing conventions that departed far from ordinary speech (and this was regarded by some as 'unscientific'). I did however depend on the transcribed words in my analysis of meaning. One time, about a decade ago, I returned to a very old audio recording to check the accuracy of a piece of transcript that was ambiguous. I got a shock. The person who came across from the voice<sup>2</sup> was not the same one that I had re-envisioned as I worked on the transcript. I listened on; I listened to the whole tape. In retrospect, it seems obvious that the transcript loses layers of meaning conveyed in tone, pace, emphasis, flow, rhythm and so on. Detailed transcription conventions attempt to capture these in technical special symbols, but in my view lose the meaning of the whole (the 'gestalt') in their preoccupation with detail: when I read one of these transcripts, the person who uttered the words has been drowned out; I cannot recreate the meaning. It seems to me that, whether we like it or not, we use our imaginations to make meaning out of the information at our disposal, however threadbare, and that the danger is in a denial that this is the case, as opposed to recognising and reflecting on such use, and using fuller forms of data where possible. In order to succeed in representing lived experience in its dynamic, multifaceted, complex and conflictual wholeness, words have to be used in such a way that they are not stripped bare of the emotional, sensuous, desiring and embodied life that they are available to represent. This requires

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Thomson, a sociologist, has come to similar conclusions from the perspective of working in research teams concerned to recognise the importance of time, process and change in individuals (2007:571) and the need for methods that 'represent a psychologically complex, mobile and embodied subject' (2009: p2draft).

<sup>2</sup> Carol Gilligan's work is based on the proposition that 'voice' conveys a lot more than sound: 'by voice I mean something like the core of the self. Voice is natural and also cultural. It is composed of breath and sound, words, rhythm, and language. And voice is a powerful psychological instrument and channel, connecting inner and outer worlds' (Gilligan 1993, xvi).

imagination but this word should not be opposed to facticity. If words cease to retain their vivacity – in the social work case report, in the case interview, in the research interview – they will not succeed as meaningful communications from and of people's lives: they will not succeed in moving the recipients of the communications and without this e-motion (literally 'movement out of'), meaning is depleted.

Now I work with audio records alongside transcript. But listening to the participant's voice means more than listening to the audio record. It requires attention to the initial research encounter in which researchers can use their own relationship to the scene to register the ways that they are emotionally affected by it. The situation in which a string of words emerges to represent experience is always intersubjective (even when there is no one present to hear them, there are other imagined recipients, present in the speaker/writer's imagination). Thus the relation between participant and researcher needs to remain central. I have emphasised the intersubjective action of emotion in generating meaning here and this is often registered in an embodied fashion, initially beyond words. To access this requires putting the whole of one's subjectivity at the service of understanding the interaction. This is what I mean by 'using the researcher's subjectivity as an instrument of knowing'. It has racial implications for research methodology.

Psychoanalysis has been central in my development of this principle, both as a body of theory about the nature of experience and subjectivity, and as a unique epistemology which historically was based on working through the subjective, affective experience of the psychoanalyst in order to understand the patient. In two ways I have sought to apply this paradigm to qualitative empirical psychosocial research. A word of caution is required here, in light of recent critique of the use of psychoanalysis in a psychosocial approach to research (Frosh and Baraitser 2007). There are many sound reasons for not adopting psychoanalysis as it is practised in the consulting room as a research tool (ibid) and so it is a matter of adapting this paradigm for research, finding a 'psychoanalytic "sensibility"', a way of working with human participants that instigates a constant reworking of the knowledge bases that we come with' (Baraitser 2007:426). This is why I refer to 'psychoanalytically informed' methods, rather than psychoanalytic methods. The first, with Tony Jefferson (Hollway and Jefferson 2000), was the Free Association Narrative Interview (FANI) method, based on Freud's idea of free association as a means of tapping into unconscious wishes. Our method aimed to access latent meaning through eliciting and focusing on the associations between ideas, as opposed to exclusively on words and word clusters. This was based on the psychoanalytic premise of defended research subjects, 'defended' in the sense that, following psychoanalytic principles, it is assumed that research subjects are not necessarily transparent to themselves. The same is true in principle of researchers, but there is an asymmetry, based on the fact that the research relation is focused on the participant and it is their investment in that topic (their own life, identity and relations) that may well occasion defensive self accounting. For the researcher, defensiveness will be related to the extent and type of their identifications with the participant.

Why did I begin to feel that interviewing was insufficient, given that the FANI method is capable of eliciting accounts that remain close to experience and embedded in their settings? How serious were the remaining limitations inherent in the way that this method depends on narratives based in language? Despite its capacity to elicit free associations, the method must share some of the weaknesses of any talk-based method: by eliciting a mode of communication that is to a great extent under conscious control, perhaps there is too much of a tendency to reproduce, within and beyond social science, images of a rational, unitary, discursive subject. The second method, psychoanalytically informed observation, therefore aimed to go beyond an exclusive methodological focus on text towards a focus on practices and embodied, affective expressions of states of mind and relationship as they are enacted and change through time. Together the two methods had the potential to complement each other and to achieve a kind of triangulation that would support the validity of both.

When I claim that my methods, interview and observation, are informed by psychoanalysis, I mean that they are based on an ontology - a way of understanding people – that emphasises the effects of affect, dynamic conflict, unconscious intersubjective processes and embodied practices on the formation of identity. Nancy Chodorow, a feminist, relational psychoanalyst, sees her perspective as characterised by:

The radically uncommonsensual and anxiety-provoking understandings underpinning psychoanalysis – that projective and introjective fantasies are ever-changing, that motives are unconscious, that humans interpret and construct the world and our lives in terms of unconscious, emotionally-laden wishes, fears and fantasies, that anxiety generates major aspects of human functioning (including the analyst's). (Chodorow 1999 p103)

In my view, experience-near methods will benefit by incorporating this understanding of the participants (and researchers) in psycho-social research and information-gathering practices in the health and social care professions.

In summary, there are two grounds for believing that a psychoanalytically informed paradigm can enrich psycho-social research methods; epistemological and ontological. Epistemologically the paradigm can help the use of researcher subjectivity as an instrument of knowing. Ontologically it can inform an understanding of participant subjectivity. Of course these two reasons are intimately lined because a psychoanalytic emphasis on unconscious dynamic intersubjectivity ensures that the focus of both epistemology and ontology is on the affective traffic within relationships, be it the relationship between researcher and researched or those of participants in their life world, past, present and anticipated future.

## **2. The research project**

In what follows, I shall give the example of a recent empirical research project to show how I used and developed these principles. Its relevance to social work is apparent when I specify that it is about how women are changed by becoming mothers for the first time, how their identities accommodate the profound psychological upheaval involved. It has implications for the wellbeing of children as well as women who mother. The project was based within the 'Identities and Social Action' ESRC-funded programme<sup>3</sup>. The transition to motherhood was chosen as a prime site for studying identity change, understood as dynamic, conflictual, biographical, relational, practical and situated.

Twenty first-time mothers were recruited in Tower Hamlets, a Borough in the East End of London containing a high level of deprivation and disadvantage, a history of accommodating waves of immigrants and a recent surge of policy initiatives concerning children and families. A new population of young professionals, many working in the rapidly expanding financial sector also situated within the borough, has increased the Borough's diversity. Our sample reflected these ethnic and class diversities and also differences in partner, employment and accommodation status, as well as relation to family of origin.

Three interviews based on the principles of the FANI method (Hollway and Jefferson 2000) were conducted over the course of a year: in the last trimester of pregnancy (or early weeks of motherhood if we missed), at four months and at 12 months after the birth. For me one new challenge of this study was to develop experience-near field notes, notes that were capable of conveying the alive quality of the event even long after it had happened, capable of taking the researchers imaginatively into the scene whether they had been there or not. We worked closely with the 'Making of Modern Motherhoods' research team, also based at the Open University and in the same programme. We adopted their writing of 'reflexive field notes', 'in which researchers are encouraged to document the emotional dynamics of research encounters and their personal reactions to fieldwork situations' (Thomson 2009 :3draft). For example, we adopted their technique of including in the field note after each interview answers to the question 'What are my hopes and fears for this mother'? A thorough description of the interview setting helped us to re-imagine the setting long after the event. The principles and practices of the psychoanalytically informed observation, which was proceeding alongside and drawing on six of the same mothers, were also highly influential.

Psychoanalytically informed observation derives from the infant observation tradition developed at the Tavistock clinic (Bick 1964, Miller et al 1999). Six

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<sup>3</sup> Our three-year project "Identities in Process: Becoming African, Caribbean, Bangladeshi and white mothers in Tower Hamlets" was funded by The Economic and Social Research Council (grant number 148-25-0058), the government funder of social science research in the UK. The research team consisted of Wendy Hollway, Ann Phoenix, Heather Elliott, Cathy Urwin and Yasmin Gunaratnam. Dr Cathy Urwin led the observation side of the project and conducted the weekly observation seminars attended by members of the research team. She edited a special journal issue on the observations cases (Urwin 2007).

trained 'infant observers' (not members of the research team) each observed one of the larger sample of mothers, once per week over the course of the first year of her baby's life. For six of the mothers in our sample (two Bangladeshi, one white English, one African-Caribbean, one West African and one white South African) we therefore have all types of data: interviews (recordings and transcripts), field notes, observation notes and seminar notes.

Observers make notes only after the session has ended, at the time paying detailed attention to the baby and mother. The principle behind the note-writing style of representing the observer's experience is that

'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' (Miller et al 1989 p2).

Because this method evolved as a training in infant and young child development, observers become very good at noticing non-verbal, embodied aspects of communication and mental states. It was therefore consistent with our aim to go beyond the consciously aware, talk-based methods of finding out about identity, wishing to pick up a range of other levels, from the unsaid to the unsayable; that is those that reside in and are expressed through the body (often theorised as the psychoanalytic unconscious). Two practitioners who have applied psychoanalytic observation in organisations characterise the following five characteristics as defining the method:

- Evenly hovering attention without premature judgement
- Use of subjective experience
- Capacity to think and reflect about the experience as a whole
- Recognition of the unconscious dimension
- Informed interpretation (Hinshelwood and Skogstadt 2000 p17).

In the psychoanalytic training tradition, the observation method is combined with a weekly observation seminar, in which the group of observers meets throughout the observation period, led by an experienced psychoanalytically-trained observer, to process together the impact of the developing observation. Likewise, ours were not seminars in the sense of being convened for the purposes of applying theory to the data: 'The weekly observation seminars were deliberately devoid of theoretical discussion, both to avoid the tendency for theory to lead or blind observation and because of the assumption that new theory may be required' (Urwin 2007 p249).

The group's task is to use members' subjective responses to the case, which the group can then reflect upon together. This helps the metabolisation of observers' experiences. Identifications with any or all of the participants who have been observed will be present in this material. The different identifications in the group provide a kind of triangulation and contribute to the analysis of the material. An example of group reflection is when one observer

was wondering what the significance of the mother's home culture in West Africa was for Martina when her mother visited and wanted to take the baby back with her while Martina and her husband resumed their jobs full-time in London. In this case group members could contribute their varying knowledges of that culture and together think about what the maternal grandmother's offer might signify in that context. We could reflect on our varying feelings of shock at this proposal and explore the extent to which they also belonged to Martina and her husband. This example highlights the desirability of not being a mono-cultural group. An example of the group's help in metabolising a difficult experience is when one observer who was treated in inconsistent and careless ways by the mother she was observing, 'through the support of the group ... was able to process my hurt and angry feelings and to think about them as belonging to Azra and as reflecting her way of communicating them' (Layton, 2007: 260).

When applied to the observations in our research project, the principle of using observers', group's and researchers' subjectivities as instruments of knowing has radical implications for the ways that researchers arrive at understanding participants, especially because the principle goes against centuries of scientific modernist tradition about methods of knowing that are based on 'objectivity'. At an epistemological level, this involves re-theorising terms like subjectivity and objectivity, reliability and validity as part of a debate that is new to many social scientists and contentious. We need to ensure that this use of subjectivity safeguards both research ethics and what conventionally was called 'objectivity', which I prefer to characterise as treatment that is accurate, fair, disinterested and impartial, but needs also to preserve meaningfulness (Hollway 2008). For example, it is recognised that identifications with family members can act as powerful vehicles for transferring an observer's material on to a participant in ways that could compromise objectivity.

In our research design, three mechanisms of support were drawn upon to help the objective thinking of those involved. I have described the observation seminar above. We also used a plethora of group configurations for data analytic purposes (the research team, joint meetings with the team from our sister project, special workshops drawing in others), 'privileging collective forms of working in recognition that collectively we are more than the sum of our parts (Thomson 2009:4draft). Thirdly, we had budgeted for a consultant whom the researcher could contact when she felt in danger of being besieged by experiences that touched too closely on her own situation, which was similar to the women she was interviewing in some respects (location, being a mother of young children) (Elliott, in preparation). A psychotherapeutically trained person can help provide perspective that enables complex difficult emotions connected to research material to be contained and thought about, so that the impact can be productive rather than unhelpful.<sup>4</sup> At an epistemological level, the idea of objectivity requires retheorising, outside of the tradition of positivist science. Psychoanalysis has had a largely

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<sup>4</sup> This is parallel to clinical supervision, which is securely established in psychoanalytic practice. A variant of it used to be a common feature of social work practice.



independent tradition of theorising objective knowing which is useful here. For example Donald Winnicott's developmental psychoanalysis traced the baby's crucial move from creating 'subjective objects' dictated by the desire for omnipotent control, to an ability to acknowledge 'objects, objectively perceived' (Hollway 2006 p37). Such dynamics are not confined to childhood, as Wilfred Bion (1962), with a slightly different conceptual emphasis, demonstrates in his theorising of containment and learning from experience.

In our research project, we adapted the psychoanalytic observation method in two fundamental ways: from a training method to a research method and from observing babies - in the mother-baby couple - to observing mothers in that couple (see Urwin 2007 pp 244-6 for more detail). In practice, this did not make much difference because of the significance of the relation of mother and baby as the object of study – as opposed to the idea of the mother as a separate individual. This is particularly salient in the first weeks and months of course and is basic to relational psychoanalytic paradigms, for example in Loewald's statement that 'mother and baby do not get together and develop a relationship, but the baby is born, becomes detached from the mother, and thus a relatedness between two parts that originally were one becomes possible' (1951/1980, p. 11). Although we maintained the traditional observation frame, its' setting within a wider research project obviously influenced how the observers experienced what they were engaged upon. The core research team (Elliott, Hollway and Phoenix, also the interviewers) was a salient presence for the observers because we attended the weekly seminar group, with the exception that the researcher who interviewed the mother whose case was being addressed that evening did not attend. This was so that the observers' knowledge through the method was not 'contaminated' by the kinds of knowledge gained through interviews.

### **3. How did the methods perform in practice?**

To recapitulate, the combination of psychoanalytically informed interview and observation was developed to enable a psycho-social understanding of identities in process through a study of becoming a mother for the first time. In this section I want to ask, how did the methods perform? What did we learn by their use that may not have been afforded without them?

I shall briefly<sup>5</sup> deal with these questions under the following headings:

- Dimensions of time
- Spatial sensitivity
- Embodiment and practices
- Research knowing: Objectivity, validity and ethical research practice.

#### *Dimensions of time*

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<sup>5</sup> These topics form much of my current writing, enabled by an ESRC Research Fellowship (grant number 063 -27-0118) entitled 'Maternal Identities, Care and Intersubjectivity', which uses the data from the Becoming a Mother project to develop ontological, methodological and epistemological implications of a psycho-social research paradigm (Hollway forthcoming). In this section, therefore, I confine the topics to an illustrative few and refer to other relevant writings.

Various dimensions of time have appeared much more salient to me than usual in this research project. This is partly a necessary result of a topic that is about identity changes through time, but it goes beyond this. Longitudinal methods have resurfaced in social sciences (Thomson, Plumridge and Holland 2003). One year was a regrettably short period in which to achieve our understanding of the profound changes in maternal subjectivity and indeed the observers, trained in a tradition of two-year baby observations, found the end of the first year to be a frustrating time to have to finish observations, with separation processes in full swing and mothers experiencing another wave of identity upheaval in the face of this and, for many, the return to employment. We were painfully aware of how challenging was 'the absence of analytic closure' (Thomson 2003: 243).

The two methods provided an instructive contrast based on the frequency of data points: gaps of four to six months between interview visits compared to weekly observation visits. The mundane detail of changes emerging weekly contributed to the experience-near quality of the observation data and the observers' weekly visits succeeded in recording the ups and downs involved in identity change processes that were often necessarily smoothed out in the generalisation required for a narrative of events between interview visits where the gap is several months. However, this difference does not simply involve a neutral application by participants of different levels of conveying the same information, generalising and particularising. For example in Zelda's case, the story provided to the interviewer after several months (and despite the interviewer's attempts to elicit experience-near accounts of events) consisted of generalisations about the baby's feeding and sleeping that built up a narrative of trouble-free progress. By contrast, the weekly observations conveyed a prolonged set of difficulties, about feeding and the baby's health (see Hollway 2009 for more detail of this example). Many factors, for example those produced in the researcher-participant relationship as a result of visit frequency and style, would have contributed to this contrast. However in my view it was also the result of Zelda's desire not to think about the negative features of her mothering experience, so that these quickly sunk into unremembered history, a process of forgetting that would be aided by the production of a consistently optimistic narrative to the interviewer. I conclude that such differences in research design have profound consequences for what a research project can know about the process of identity change in new mothers. Is it smooth and a cause of almost unadulterated pleasure and satisfaction or is it a profound psychological upheaval (despite the pleasures and satisfactions)? There is truth in both versions: our methodological paradigm provides answers that do not render painful aspects of the lived life invisible.

The skilful practice of observing the embodied interaction of mother and baby in minute detail showed me something about the adjustments in pace that many mothers are required to make to accommodate their babies' pace, especially if they have been engaged in demanding work environments. In a fairly long sequence, the observer faithfully noted the gradual and slow way in which Zelda woke her baby from a midday sleep (Pluckrose 2007 p312 contains a shortened version). I was struck by the way I had to slow down my

own work pace to read the repetitions (in Zelda's words and gestures) without succumbing to the temptation to skip them. I don't think I would have noticed this had I not, by this stage, been profoundly influenced by my experience of the observation method. I tried out the same extract on a conference audience made up of social scientists, first asking them to read it silently and then reading it out at a slow pace. I asked them to notice their own reactions. Like me they had been looking for content. Like me, many found it striking that they had omitted to notice the dimension of pace as it was conveyed in the data. It would not have been possible to notice it if the observer had failed to attune her pace to that of the mother and baby, if she had unreflexively omitted the careful repetitions that formed not only a pace but a rhythm in Zelda's interaction with her baby. Such attunement is achieved through identification (Hollway 2010 in press) and if this quality is preserved in words, it can be conveyed to subsequent readers, as was achieved when it prevailed on me to change my pace of reading.

Time across generations became evident in a new light to me too, enabling me to become sensitised to what I have come to see as intergenerational transmission. This insight was afforded by the data, but to be noticed it required a psychoanalytic paradigm, because this understands the way that unconscious identifications occur, in this case between mothers and daughters. Once I was attuned to it, I saw it both in observation and interview (Hollway 2009a, in press) data – and in fathers as well as mothers. In an analysis of a segment of interview data, the research team concluded that it showed:

how new mothers are simultaneously 'self-as-mother', 'self-as-child' and therefore (...) 'mother-of-self-as-child'. Their identifications are multiply intersubjective in character because identification with their babies necessarily puts new mothers in pivotal positions in the middle of three generations since they have been babies of their own mothers (Elliott, Gunaratnam, Hollway and Phoenix 2009: 13).

### *Embodiment and practices*

The observation method did capture the mundane practices (and the emotions that are inextricable from these) involved in the going-on-being of mother and baby over time in a way that was not expressed – and perhaps not expressible - in words. In other words, the data demonstrate that this method did deliver something of what we had hoped in terms of going beyond the aspects of experience that could be described in words in an interview setting (Hollway in preparation). However, the interviews were as full of opportunities to observe practices and embodied affect as the observations were full of words. There was an overlap between the methods in this regard, amplified by how our interview method was evolving under the influence of the observation paradigm. For example we analysed the case of Silma, who was not within the observation sub-sample and whom we therefore only interviewed three times (with accompanying field notes), to highlight the importance of practices in changing identity processes, through 'acting the

part'. Silma conveyed these in words to us, but our learning about the practices was helped by her narrative style which, with the help of a method designed to elicit experience-near accounts, stayed close to her experience, while not completely eschewing generalisation. Her account of her return home from hospital with her new daughter is a typical example:

'When I was coming out the car, yeah, they were all at the door. (...) And then um (.) (softer) then I was thinking, "What shall I do?" I was a bit nervous. Then I had to make her milk, and then I fed her, changed her nappy, changed her clothes and put her to sleep. (louder) And then I used to like look at the clock every time, it was like (softer) three hours (louder) every three hours. But then she's drinking little by little bit, so it's like every two to two and a half hours actually.' (Elliott, Gunaratnam, Hollway and Phoenix 2009: 9)

### *Spatial sensitivity and multiple positioning*

The field note style that we developed as interviewers provided considerably more information about setting than a conventional semi-structured interviewing method that is used solely through transcript. The observation method also produced data that were richly descriptive, situated particularly within families and more broadly in Tower Hamlets. For example, several mothers moved a lot between the family home of their parents or parents-in-law and their own flat (either shared with their husband/partner or occupied on their own) and the observers arranged to visit them in these changing venues. The same happened with interviewers, but with only three visits in all, there were far fewer opportunities of this kind. The change in settings was informative because we saw participants situated differently as daughters, sisters, aunts, wives, at the same time as being new mothers. This information chimes with accounts of identity as multiple, as shifting according to the positions afforded in different situations and relationships.

Azra, for example, was observed at her father's house which felt like a lively nursery; most days full of the female members of her extended family with their children. Her demeanour when she was there was in sharp contrast to that at the 15<sup>th</sup> floor flat where she had moved with her husband, which to the observer felt isolated and full of anxious feelings. These contrasts in the setting were part of a picture that enabled the observer to understand the significance of Azra's loss of her mother as a teenager (Layton 2007).

### *Research knowing: objectivity, validity and ethical research practice*

An anecdote about the influence of psychoanalytic observation on our practices of data analysis will, I hope, give a flavour of what a creative source it was, how it helped to bring abstract principles of epistemology into our experience so that they could become part of a changing research practice. Every observation seminar started in the same way: the observer whose case-mother was to be the focus of the session read aloud her notes from her most recent session. Cathy Urwin, the seminar leader, would then ask for us to consider what emotional responses we had to the experience of listening to

this. The first time this happened I noticed my irritation: I was already half way through reading the text of the notes, which we all had in front of us. Would it not be faster to read it that way and save time for the real business of discussion?<sup>6</sup> From experience, however, I learned that reading out loud enabled me to attune to the emotional experience of the text, which was essential to the meaning that the notes could convey. Moreover, the fact of sharing this experience in the group heightened my attention to this layer of meaning: we all shared something and then we could explore the similarities and differences of our responses. Only after that did we proceed to consider the notes sentence by sentence. I subsequently brought the practice of reading out loud into the data analytic groups that I was working in. Often my social science colleagues initially shared my first reaction, but most were eventually convinced by the value of reading data aloud. Social scientists often find it hard to abstain, at least in the first instance, from applying intellectualising modes of analysis when faced with the task of understanding some empirically derived text. I now think that this intellectualising is in danger of stripping the living meaning out of the text and leaving something desiccated in its place. Wilfred Bion has written about this, based on his distinction between 'learning from experience' versus the 'need to know' (1962).

Paradoxically the qualitative methods tradition that I am criticising for being too text-based was influential in the wide acceptance of the idea that researchers cannot avoid understanding the phenomena they are researching through their own subjectivity. Led by feminist theory, objectivity, the 'view from nowhere' was critiqued as impossible (Harding 1991). However, consistent with its sociological emphasis, the subjectivity of the researcher, or 'researcher reflexivity' as it came to be known, was usually understood to be a product of an array of social identities (gendered, ethnicised, class-based) made salient by their difference vis-à-vis participants (but see Froggett and Wengraf, 2004, and Lucey, Melody and Walkerdine 2003, for examples of a psychosocial approach). Differences produced power relations that were often problematic. I do not want to reject this approach but rather to render it less reductive, to make the sociological psycho-social by paying attention to the dynamics of the inner world and the way that experience-near understanding contains within it social reality (Froggett and Hollway 2010). Power differences are inevitable in relationships (and can be positive as well as negative). Attempts to align the social identities of researchers and participants can be helpful but are based on a simplistic model of power and identity, as Yasmin Gunaratnam (2003) argues in detail.

I listed above three ways in which we operated safeguards in the research to enhance the objective use of our subjectivity as researchers. Of course it is impossible to guarantee perfect objectivity, because all meaning involves a process of re-presentation, or construction, of experience (and this applies to quantitative as well as qualitative methods). However, it does not follow that everything is equally unrelated to reality. Researchers can pursue validity and

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<sup>6</sup> Working faster can mean less, not more, understanding: a further lesson in the importance of pace!

reliability (to use old-fashioned scientific terminology) in their data analysis, but can start from the premises that it is necessary and desirable to use our own subjectivities as instruments of knowing and that our knowledge is provisional.

### **Conclusion: being experience-near**

This article is about the value of words in representing experience for research purposes. It is not words that are problematic in themselves; on the contrary, they are a fundamental feature of human communication because they are laden with affect and expressive because of this relation to the body (Baraitser 2008). The issue is when words are imprisoned as text in the service of an illusory version of objectivity, shorn of the dimensions of embodied affect and the full range of ways in which people communicate (involving unconscious, as well as conscious, intersubjectivity). I want to bring these dimensions back into research and demonstrate their legitimacy. 'Experience-near' means that, however that experience is represented, it must retain its vivacity, which means its capacity to elicit another person's 'compassion' (literally meaning 'feel with', Hollway 2006 p42). I have followed this route to knowing in a research project and given examples of the research design and practice, including the safeguards, that produced a corpus of data that affords a rich and complex view of maternal subjectivity.

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