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Interpretation group method in the Dubrovnik tradition.

Wendy Hollway and Birgit Volmerg. June 2010

The issue was raised in our evaluation that new members of SQUID had no formal way of knowing the basis of the method used in the interpretation groups that have become an important element in our annual programme. There has been a diversity of methods in practice, but it is felt that systematically setting out a basic method is helpful and that we can diversify from this basis with more awareness about what we are doing and why.

Wendy Hollway wrote a draft, which Birgit Volmerg has read and developed, specifying more precisely the theoretical rationale and procedure. Additions, comments, modifications, questions and dialogue about the evolving statement would be an activity that in itself should be a useful learning process. Two things come to mind immediately: first, a brief history of how the method got to Dubrovnik and second, thoughts about if and how the method might be appropriate for other forms of data such as field notes, or observation records.

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The interpretation group method was developed for use in analysing qualitative empirical textual data. Most often it is used to analyse transcripts derived from research interviews with individuals and groups. The availability of different perspectives through the group members provides a form of triangulation with the text, enabling a dynamic and creative learning process. The following account is divided into three parts.

1. The generic method in its simple five-step form
2. An elaboration in Lorenzerian style, which involves a distinction between manifest and latent meanings in the text and an orientation to scenic understanding as a way of approaching a psycho-societal analysis.

1. A simplified generic version follows five steps:

a) A small extract from transcript data is selected by the researcher. The emphasis is on small so that in-depth analysis can be performed and the tendency to skate over the surface resisted. This is usually stipulated as no more than one page when the interpretation group has a limited time of perhaps two hours. A potential criticism is that this process of extraction deprives the interpretation group of a larger whole, or gestalt, required to make sense of the specific extract. Sometimes the researcher distributes more pages of transcripts to be read in advance as background.

What is the theoretical justification for extracting a short selection from the whole? The selection criteria should address, for example, the emotional involvement of the interviewee or of the group in a discussion, the repetition of the subject matter, strange or irritating phrases in the text and take into account the impact on the readers as well, which is important.

But this selection requires a prior step, accomplished before the text appears in Dubrovnik. At the very beginning of the interpretation you should read the whole transcript and consider what topics and themes emerge. This is a horizontal-hermeneutic approach in contrast to a vertical-hermeneutic (or depth-hermeneutic) one. In this first step you identify broad themes and cluster passages that belong to these. You include all the data available for the case at this stage. Within these clusters you look for parts of transcripts according to the above-mentioned criteria. The assumption is that this leads us to the hidden meaning of the text.

b) The extract is read aloud to the whole group. If the extract involves two or more voices (for example, interviewee and interviewer), these are performed by different members of the group. The readers bring their everyday cultural understanding of the meaning and significance of the transcript into their performance through intonation, emphasis etc.

c) Members of the group take turns to say something about their immediate reaction to – or perhaps more specifically feelings about – what they have just heard. This initial round should abstain from interpretation or theorisation. For example ‘his story made me feel sad, I wanted him to ...’.

d) Next the group engages in a line-by-line or phrase-by-phrase detailed analysis. This notices, for example, vocabulary, hesitations, repetitions, avoidances, tone of claims, position of self in relation to others, past and present. It is worth noting that in our multinational research context, many texts have been translated into English and this detailed analysis should involve being able to return to the original language of the research encounter to avoid losses in translation.

e) Finally there is some attempt to draw things together into a conclusion, apply different conceptual tools to the analysis, (whether consciously or not) and reflect on their utility for a psycho-societal analysis. We try to avoid premature closure in this process; that is remain aware that there is much we do not know and that it is inadvisable to apply didactically a tidy theoretical perspective.

2. An interpretation group analysis in the tradition of Alfred Lorenzer specifies the 4th and 5th stages of the above procedure in a theoretically and technically elaborated manner. The group takes three questions, in the following order, to orientate their analysis of the text: ***What is said, How is it said and Why is it said in this particular way?*** These questions are related to different levels of understanding human speech and communication, which are also described by theories of language: ‘What is said’ corresponds to the propositional meaning, ‘how is it said’ (to you) corresponds to the meta-communicative meaning and ‘how is it said about what’ to the pragmatic meaning. ‘Why is it said in this particular way’ addresses the intentional meaning. The first two questions – what and how - provide a focus on the sequence of sentences or short paragraph (whatever units of meaning appear relevant for making sense of the extract) to inform the detailed sequential

analysis. The third question – why - brings together the parts with the whole extract.

The first question, 'what is said?' addresses the manifest meaning of the text. This can be summarised precisely.

The second question, 'how is it said?', has two elements.

- The first aims to bring out the way in which the interaction expresses the relationship between the participant and researcher: how does the passage position – or imagine – the researcher. This question aims to clarify the countertransference. In practice it is likely to pick up themes from the initial round of first impressions, but specify these more clearly in relation to changes of unconscious address to the interviewer at different moments. If, for example, the interviewer is feeling very protective, to the extent of not being able to ask certain important, but potentially challenging questions, it would be clarified here.
- The second part of 'how is it said?' looks for the key feeling tone of each unit of text, as it expresses the speaker's relationship to the objects that he or she is talking about. For example 'it comes over as tentative' or 'she seems to be focussing on the hard external world in this passage' or 'there is a pervasive quality of looking back on his past working life as if from a position of it already being ended' or 'there is a succession of strong, emphatic phrases in this passage, for example ...'. The second how-question lets us concentrate on the stories told by the interviewee. These stories are scenic as well; mostly the teller is represented as someone involved in concrete social situations, as in a drama. The person is interested to describe himself or herself and the others in this drama in order to show a specific picture, in harmony with the self image, which stabilizes it. We compare the different tellings: are there similar scenes, typical patterns; are there inconsistencies and irritating phrases which do not fit?

This differentiation into two how-questions opens a trace to the transference-countertransference relationship between/within the interpretation group and their understanding of the text. Here is the first chance to grasp the unconscious scenery, in which the interpreter is evoked to counteract: be aware of your role in the scenery and make a mental note of it (the scene will be reactivated in the interpretation group as well). We are still not on the level of the unconscious meaning.

The third question, *why is it said in this particular way*, can also be differentiated into the manifest intentions and the hidden, excluded intentions. The manifest intentions can be read in the text, but it is possible that they follow an unconscious strategy, a purpose, which only can be understood when we are aware of our feelings and wishes regarding our own transference and countertransference reactions; regarding the scenes portrayed by the interviewee and regarding the interpretation group itself. All these act as a mirror of the unconscious scene. This requires the interpretation group members' willingness to become emotionally involved in the contents of the text and to express their own feelings. So the why-

question uses scenic understanding, which means looking for what may run counter to the manifest meaning – what has been ‘excommunicated’ from language.

It is in addressing this third question that interpretation is most obviously and actively at work and where our theoretical concepts play an important part, but led by and limited by the data in front of us. It is likely that interpretations at this level make use of the whole of the data extract (so corresponding with the fifth step of the simplified version above), and take into account everything that is known about the interviewee in the setting not just of the research relationship but the wider societal and policy context. For example: ‘he expresses ambivalence about living out his dreams, relinquished in his own working life but displaced on to his son in the shape of , this shape reflecting the way that technologies changed between his and his son’s generation ...’ or ‘there seems to be a move between 1st to 2nd interview from something manic, as exemplified in ... to a depressed and depressive experience of future possibilities. This raises the possibility of a relapse ...’. The psycho-societal is contained in the scene, thus interpreted and can perhaps be grasped in a non-dualistic way.

Responding to the last section, Birgit commented on the differences that appeared, so we are adding what follows in the spirit of beginning the dialogue to which everyone is invited to contribute:

Birgit: Whereas I am interested to say the unconscious meaning of the "scene" in a text can only be understood by using your own unconsciousness, for instance by imagining yourself as player in the scene, are you emphasising the theoretical frame and social information that derives from outside the extract to reach a meaning above the text? I think both these are important. Perhaps we should differentiate the levels more explicitly: where do they lead us? For instance, when, faced with the text, we discover our own prejudices, taboos and defence mechanisms, this leads us to the psycho- societal structure as part of ourselves, which can be related and discussed with theoretically based assumptions about the psycho-societal structure as part of the society. In this way, the evidence of the understanding can be validated from two sides.