

Inter-subjectivity in biographical methods: mirroring and enactment in an organisational study

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DRAFT

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Abstract

This paper discusses methodological developments during a three year evaluation of a highly creative arts-based community health organisation in London. In collaboration with the organisation, the research involved a multidisciplinary team of four researchers. The paper will discuss how combining biographical interviews with observation methods led to a number of changes in our methodological procedures and in our understanding and use of them. Realising that interactions in the interview might enact personal and organisational processes encouraged a more interventionist style of interviewing. And instead of expecting to find the gestalt of the interview in the initial narrative we focused on the dynamics of the whole interview, in which there was often a development.

Through reflective discussions in the research team on our observations and interview interpretations we came to see conflicts among ourselves as a mirroring of conflicts in the organisation. Understanding dynamics in the team could at times help us to understand the Centre, but understanding the culture of the Centre also brought a new understanding of our own research processes. Our emphasis on narrative made us slow to grasp the significance of ‘syncretistic’ artistic processes in the mindset of the Centre. Discovering a language for these creative processes helped us name our own interpretation processes, which are also emergent, interactive and holistic. The fact that such issues are being engaged with in literature on complexity, emotional intelligence and reflective practice confirms to us the timeliness of the contribution of biographical and observation methods to current policy and practice concerns.

Introduction

Four or five years ago I wanted to give a paper (in Kassel) about the neglect of imagination in accounts of interpretation. I wrote that into the abstract but said little about it, because I didn’t have enough material to elaborate my argument. Now I am able to, tentatively, thanks to an experience of team research in a three year evaluation of an arts-based community health Centre (*project title and team names*).¹ This agency study combined biographical with observation methods by pooling our respective expertise.²

¹ ‘Evaluation of the Bromley by Bow Healthy Living Centre’s Work with Older People’ was funded by the Dunhill Medical Trust, Feb 2002-5. The researcher team consisted of Lynn Froggett, Prue Chamberlayne, Tom Wengraf and Stefanie Buckner.

² At the beginning of the project Lynn and Stef trained in biographical methods, which Tom and I teach. Our five-day course originated as an offshoot from the Quatext in Berlin, after the use of the

Despite the centrality of art to the Centre's work, creativity and imagination appeared rather late as methodological issues, as I shall show. What was new for me from the beginning was the focus on inter-subjective processes, in the Centre and in the team, and between the two, and how we could make use of them methodologically through concepts such as mirroring, enactment.³ A greater focus on inter-subjective processes in interviews and their interpretation also proved fruitful. It speeded up our analysis and enhanced and helped to name and give a methodological account of free associative processes we had been pragmatically using, especially in comparing cases, for some time.

Attention to inter-subjectivity is particularly relevant in professionally applied research, as the German work on biography and social work amply suggests (Apitzsch et al 2004). It was all the more so in an organisation which itself paid great attention to personal development and relational work, and in research deploying a (rather varied) research team. Over the years I have come to realise that it is a very different thing to use biographical methods in applied settings as compared with sociological studies.

Bringing psychodynamic thinking into biographical methods seems contentious in Germany, whereas we have not met this particular resistance in Britain. Different societies have different disciplinary disputes! In Britain there has for several years now been a great interest in deeper levels of subjectivity, as in Hollway and Jefferson's work on the defended subject (Hollway and Jefferson 2001). There can be hot disputes with more discourse-based approaches to identity, and on ethical issues, but these have been becoming more amicable. Most of the (doctoral and post-doctoral) people coming on our courses are open to or actually using psycho-dynamic ideas. The arguments of those in Germany between those who find biographical-interpretive research overly linear, rational and unitary towards the human subject find no echo in Britain – no-one who uses BNIM can recognise the alleged problem as being a problem (Knapp et al 1994). They value it precisely for its complex apprehension of human subjectivity and ambivalence. They also appreciate an emphasis on imaginative and free associative play in interpretation and case comparison, which sometimes meets disapproval, for reasons I have never quite understood. Perhaps they feel such methods are unsystematic, which I do not believe to be the case. I do agree that the way in which they are 'systematic' needs to be spelled out, and hopefully this paper is a contribution to that task.

What I want to do in this paper therefore to introduce the Centre and then point to four ways in which we have extended our research method, or 'come to see it differently', in the course of the study. The developments came about both from the combining of biographical with observation methods and the influence of the Centre

biographical-interpretive method in two comparative projects (Cultures of Care 1992-6 and SOSTRIS 1996-9). In Britain the method has become known as BNIM (biographic-narrative interpretive method) as expounded in Wengraf 2001 and his *Short Guide* 2005. We were learning about psychodynamic observational methods from Lynn.

³ I could use terms like projection and countertransference, but in general I won't, because I am not well versed in them.

itself. The main sections cover more holistic interview interpretation, mirroring in meeting processes, trusting emergence in the action research element, and capturing artistic processes as key to Centre culture. The last section then discusses how appreciating the central function of artistic processes in the Centre in turn helped us to name inter-subjective and imaginative processes in our own research and training method.

The Centre

The agency is a multi-cultural and arts-based community health Centre, which has retained its creative, relational and reflective character over a period of 20 years. This is surprising in the regulatory neo-liberal context of current British welfare.

The Centre is located in East London, historically deprived and now de-industrialised, with a large Bengali city. Starting with hippy artists in a derelict church in 1984, the Centre first developed a nursery and community care day centre, and then a health practice which opened with new buildings in 1998. Depending at first on spectacular private sponsorship, more recently it has relied on public service contracts, especially in education and environment work. It has also adopted a business enterprise approach to all activities, as in its café, gardening and performing arts work. It has a patient list of 4000, and weekly attendance of about 1k ? Art and story-telling remain central to all activities – 25 artists involved.

Pictures of building and activities

Talk through principles:

- everyone has something to contribute and everyone has something to learn
- cross-cultural and intergenerational
- imagination and creativity - fun and libidinal energy
- conversational community
- holistic developmental work eg depressed mother to volunteer to worker and to organiser

Our three year evaluation study focused on the Centre's health work with older people. But our task was also to capture its more general features: its distinctive culture and way of working; how it has managed to maintain and reproduce itself; how transferable its methods might be to other services (Froggett et al 2005).

A holistic approach to narrative interviews

The organisation's abundance of personal and organisational stories attune well with biographical methods, and narrative interviews produced subtle accounts of user and worker experiences at the Centre. Soon we saw however that interactions between interviewer (who might be Stef, Lynn or myself) and interviewee might well enact aspects of Centre ways of working, patterns which came to be perceived through 'loose' team reflections in workshops (Buckner 2005; Froggett and Wengraf 2004). Similarly, the developmental dynamic of a whole interview, including what was not said, might convey struggles and tensions at the Centre, and whether or not the handling of these might be sayable or supported (see also Chamberlayne 2004). This

contrasted with expecting to find the gestalt of the interview to be yielded up by the initial narrative, as we had often done in practice in the Sostris project.⁴

Mirroring in meetings and diaries

In research meetings we devoted considerable time to reflecting on our own thinking and puzzles about the Centre. Soon we found that conflicts within the Centre (such as whether it was too closed off from the wider community as an enclave or whether it needed its protected environment), were reflected in our own responses. Thus we began to treat our own anxieties and frustrations as telling data, generating hunches that invariably proved valuable to explore further. Though easier to say than do, we deliberately made meetings fluid and rambling, since the best insights often emerged from ‘looseness’.

This idea of ‘mirroring’ between the Centre and the research team proved helpful in analysing Stef’s weekly observational diaries. Stef was the resident researcher, while the rest of us visited occasionally. We realised that Stef’s frustrations as an orderly, science-minded person represented one side of a cleavage in the Centre around administration and time-keeping. As Tom Wengraf wrote:

We can use Stef’s experienced subjectivity as recorded in the diaries to give us something of a privileged guide to the ‘negative aspects’ of Centre practice, to its ‘shadow side’, as experienced particularly by somebody for whom the average degree of ‘normal chaos’ in the Centre is more than she can feel comfortable with. In that sense, her prior subjectivity predisposes her to ‘see what the dominant institutional rhetoric disposes people to not-see’, and is therefore particularly valuable as a counter-perspective to that of the ‘official vision’⁵.

Tolerating uncertainty in the Development Group

The Development Group was a component in participative action research (PAR) that brought together Centre organisers of activities involving older people to consider the relevance of research to their work. The researchers’ role was to sit back and observe a group in process, which meant we could not push things forward, or only ‘from behind’. Meetings were slow to take off, with patchy attendance, yet always yielded rich discussions. Discussions of the role of story-telling in the various activities often focused on generational and gender conflicts in the Bengali community. Time to compare group experiences was much appreciated, and this led onto photographic and video recordings of groups. New activities developed around healthy eating as a result of Development group networking, and this was taken up as a theme for a visual display showing links between groups at the Summer Fair.

The researchers found the group an anxiety-provoking roller coaster. We were torn amongst ourselves, not only between free associative and more conventionally

⁴ Exigencies of time and the newness of biographical methods to several of the teams were one reason for this (Chamberlayne et al 2002)

⁵ Tom Wengraf – Report on Stef’s Diaries 12 April 2004, Working research document.

‘scientifistic’ methods of inquiry, but also between our (rather contradictory) aims of using the Group to apprehend unconscious dynamics in the Centre and using it to embed research there. My summarising report was considered too difficult. Basically we considered the Group a failure.

So we were stunned some months later at a breakfast follow-up meeting to find that Group members valued the visual display and discussions that taken place around it. They suggested extending it as a means of presenting centre work, and requested training in self-evaluation.⁶ Meanwhile we were getting requests to be interviewed and offers by Centre organisers to conduct interviews!

At this point we realised that we had not trusted our own methodological commitment to emergence in research, and that the internal group of Centre organisers had been better able to tolerate uncertainty and frustration than we had. We also found that by thinking more about the wider organisational context we could make sense of many of the Group’s difficulties. The group had coincided with a transition, the settling in of a new director and a new enterprise orientation. It was also contending with negative baggage around previous research, which we were slow to pick up on.

Artistic processes and capturing the organisational culture

The fabulous art work around healthy eating and projects such as diabetes and asthma, and attention to every detail of building design made us think both about visual analysis, and the embodied nature of health and art experience at the Centre. A highpoint in this was Lynn’s analysis of *Annie’s drawing* (Froggett 2005a) Even more helpfully, theories of artistic processes enabled us to link creativity with the Centre’s organisational dynamic, and to connect that with new theories about complex adaptive systems.

The Development Group had forced us to take more seriously processes of messiness and ‘negative capability’⁷, commonly referred to these days as ‘staying with the process’. The notion of ‘syncretistic’ thinking (which comes from Piaget) became particularly useful in describing both Centre processes and aspects of our own methodology. Referring to Ehrenzweig (1967), Lynn writes:

Syncretistic perception is relatively undifferentiated, taking in complex structures in a single sweep. It involves the scanning of whole objects and their interrelated parts without focussing in on a particular detail or dominant pattern. Whereas analysis breaks up the object into component parts or extracts a gestalt, syncretism takes a global view or perceives the background matrix that produces the figure ... it allows one to see or re-configure the linkages in a complex structure ... suspending the deconstructive moment of analysis allows a different relation between self and object in which unconscious associations have free play, and primary process is brought to bear on the object (2005, 11).

⁶ The Centre had just experienced an externally imposed monitoring exercise of educational activities!

⁷ In a letter to his brothers in December 1817, the poet Keats writes of ‘Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’ (*John Keats: selected letters*, Oxford World Classics 2002, p41).

We came to see syncretistic capacities as fundamental to the Centre's special culture:

- making connections between different areas of experience, taking risks and crossing boundaries
- interpersonal responsiveness through creative connection, especially across cultural difference
- maintaining direction amidst uncertainty and handling (many) tensions
- 'holding' creative space and tolerating attendant anxieties.

Understanding core capacities in the Centre in this way seem to resolve our key puzzle concerning how it managed to change while protecting its identity. This we now saw as a capacity to hold in balance its 'existence as a physical and cultural enclave' while also maintaining 'open borders ... in a state of constant dynamic interchange with what lies beyond them' (Froggett et al 2005, 119). Its resilience seemed to lie in principles that had been implanted through a long, careful process and by a remarkable continuity of staff. The deep embedding of these principles meant that although 'individuals have a high degree of freedom to initiate change (they) spontaneously do so in ways that reproduce its ethos, thereby strengthening the underlying order (Froggett et al 2005, 119, referring to Jansch 1980)'.

Although Centre capacities are greatly at odds with the norms of targeted performance outputs, they figure strongly in contemporary discussions about 'emotionally intelligent leadership' and 'complex adaptive organisations' (Halton 2004; Wheatley 1999). Discovering this fortified us considerably in drawing up policy recommendations!

Syncretistic capacities in research

Theories concerning creative processes also helped us think about more clearly and name certain aspects of our methodology.

I have long been intrigued by the nature of sociological and imaginative engagement in the interpretive process and in the comparing of cases (assuming these holistic presentations are lively, with plenty of quotations). Both wide-ranging and open-ended hypothesising, and responding to and discussing the presentation of a case, involve a high level of emotional and imaginative energy, with a constant shifting of levels (Chamberlayne 2004, 30-1). But social science is curiously neglectful of imaginations⁸, despite its importance as a human resource. By contrast imagination is the currency of literature, and also of some educational theory.

For Coleridge, for example, precision denotes a clearly directed energy, springing from and supported by feelings which cannot be entirely brought to light (Knights 1981, 142). Is it not such 'strong working of the mind' (*ibid*) which is mobilised in the interactive and creative process of analysing and discussing case studies, and in 'emotional thinking' (Waddell 1989)? (*ibid*).

⁸ For the sources of this loss in three different cultural contexts, see W. Lepenies *Between Literature and Science: the rise of sociology*, Cambridge 1988 (translated from the German *Die drei Kulturen* 1985)

This perspective brings the researcher's own inner emotional responses into view, making interesting parallels between research and clinical work, particularly through such concepts as projection and counter-transference (Snelling 2005; Linford 2005).

Using inter-subjective responses as a main route to observational understanding is the basis of psycho-dynamically informed methods (Skogstad 2004). Inter-subjective responses, including at subliminal levels, also figure prominently in literary criticism, and in Gadamer's dialogical hermeneutics (Schwab 2000; Iser 1978). It seems that within some sociology in Germany psychoanalytic concepts are used to discuss and reflect on interpretation processes. Bereswill (2003) reviews such approaches, contrasting them with interactionist perspectives on researcher subjectivity. Schwab (2000) also uses concepts of projection and transference in her discussion of Iser's work on reader response theory. According to Iser 'the very constitution of a text's meaning depends upon the active participation from and interaction with readers ... (and) in processing literature we must actually engage in undoing and remaking ourselves, including our cultural formations' (p4). Schwab takes issue with Iser's idea of 'this unconscious space as a pure blank instead of an arena of repression, conflict, and contestation' (p5), instead regarding reading as a special form of cultural contact. In a statement that might well describe BNIM interpretation workshops, she says that reading provides 'a space of transference that facilitates imaginary encounters with otherness to ground us in a larger world' p10. This conveys well the shifting between emotional nuances and wider contextual dynamics that are the stuff of interpretive workshops.

Conclusion

In this paper I have described the deliberate unstructured reflective process by which we came to apprehend mirroring between the research team and the Centre. I have also emphasised the role of imagination and syncretistic thinking in interpretation hypothesising and in the comparing of whole cases. So useful have we found this that in BNIM workshops for thematic field analysis⁹ and microanalysis we now push the eliciting of such responses further, explicitly asking for people's irrational gut reactions.¹⁰ In comparing cases and case dynamics we urge groups to use artistic images – with great success.

⁹ This term derives from Rosenthal/Quatext, and refers to sequential analysis of the narrative text structure to answer the question – Why was the story told in this way?

¹⁰ The text segment 'Actually the mission of what we do can still completely different to the vision of our philosophy. But we (hold) ourselves, because that's the alignment' elicited an extraordinarily rich sense of a community workers strung between a community base to which he feels committed and professional administrators, without whose language his political effectiveness is limited. This was indeed the heart of the case. The workshop participants were strangers to the research. In another workshop the following segment was discussed for all of twenty minutes: 'and I thought to myself (2) well, I'd like to see what this man's got to say for himself, so I went out, and I said, yeah, wh- (1) so what have you got to say and he said I know your mother's poisoned your mind against me ((abrupt, rushed)), I was like my mum's not said anything about anything that's gone on...'. This produced the structural hypothesis of a woman unable to reveal her vulnerabilities, her desire to be loved, to herself or to a partner. This made perfect sense of the woman's self-perception that she suffers from having 'too much power'!

By combining biographic with observation methods on the one hand, and grappling with the nature of the artistic process at the Centre on the other, we believe we have enriched our methodology in three distinct but interrelated ways:

- naming more clearly creative features in the interpretive process
- valuing and pushing further syncretistic thinking
- drawing out our own hidden subjective responses as data.

Much remains to be done to establish these steps in the methodological canon of social science. Many further questions arise, such as the need for supervision if research teams are to engage in the use of counter-transference. What I have proposed here are simply some initial steps.

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