

Expanding subjectivities

Introduction to the special issue on 'New directions in psychodynamic research'

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Editorial:

Expanding Subjectivities: Introduction to the Special Issue on ‘New Directions in Psychodynamic Research’

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Abstract

A major theme in recent psychoanalytic thinking concerns the use of therapist subjectivity, especially “countertransference,” in understanding patients. This thinking converges with and expands developments in qualitative research regarding the use of researcher subjectivity as a tool to understanding, especially but not exclusively in observational and interview-based studies. Psychodynamic or psychoanalytic approaches to research add an emphasis on unconscious motivational processes in both researchers and research participants that impact research experience and data. Building upon Anglo-Saxon and continental traditions, this special issue provides examples of the use of researcher subjectivity, informed by psychoanalytic thinking, in expanding research understanding.

Index Terms: psychoanalysis; psychodynamics; research method; research process; research framework; researcher subjectivity; countertransference; concept hierarchy

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Those concerned with understanding and improving research methodology, especially qualitative methods or flexible design (Robson, 2011), have long been concerned about the subjectivity of researchers. These methodologists emphasize that researchers bring perspectives, biases, and even needs to their work and that their research is inevitably affected by these perspectives, biases, and needs. Thus, reflexivity is recommended (Mishler, 1991). Researchers should strive to become aware of how their personal experiences and social position affect their research; transparency regarding those influences is often recommended, where appropriate.

While these recommendations appear almost commonsensical to many, they can be difficult to carry out in practice. Personal and social blinders can be difficult to perceive, much less remove. It has become common for researchers from many schools and traditions to reflect on how their experiences and perspectives affect their research data and analyses in order to mitigate or remove potential biasing effects.

But personal experience during the research process can play a more positive role. It can be a tool for deeper understanding. Especially in interview or observational research (including participant observation), the researchers' experience, including thoughts and feelings, can provide insights into the participants' experience not otherwise easily accessed. In some ways these processes parallel those found in clinical settings.

In recent decades psychoanalysts and psychodynamic therapists—those who draw upon psychoanalytic concepts, broadly defined—have also found that their internal experience while treating patients, especially when unusual or unexpected, was a valuable, increasingly central tool for understanding these patients. These experiences are referred to as *countertransference* by clinicians (Epstein & Feiner, 1993). A number of psychodynamic researchers have built upon these insights by emphasizing the role of researchers' countertransference feelings during the research process (Andersen, 2003; Brown, 2006; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Midgley, 2006). What distinguishes psychodynamic approaches from other qualitative research approaches (also emphasizing research of subjectivity) is that psychodynamic researchers, building as they do on psychoanalytic concepts, are alert to possible intrusions of unconscious motivational systems into the research experience. Love and hate, desire and defense, both when acknowledged and when unacknowledged, can affect the research process in all its stages. Thus, a deeper level of introspection, and often outside consultation is needed to understand these intrusions and use them as a tool for furthering research understanding.

This special issue of the *Journal of Research Practice* seeks to bring these lessons of clinical experience of countertransference to the research setting. The concept for this issue arose when the two of us—Stephen Soldz and Linda Lundgaard Andersen—met in 2010. As we talked we discovered that we shared a background in psychodynamic clinical training and therapeutic experience as well as a passion for applying our psychoanalytic clinical perspectives and concepts to our research efforts. We also both shared a passion for exploring social issues, drawing upon traditional social thought supplemented by psychoanalytic concepts (Soldz, 2007).

At the same time we realized that in addition to our similarities we drew upon different communities of practice. Stephen was influenced by several research and conceptual perspectives: psychoanalytic practice in the US, the recently flourishing quantitative psychodynamic research community in the US and the UK, and a developing model of qualitative-clinical psychoanalytic research embodied primarily in dissertation studies at his school, the Boston Graduate School of Psychoanalysis. Linda was part of a growing community of European researchers and one of the founding members of the research network *SQUID: The International Research Group for Psycho-Societal Analysis*, who use psychoanalytic concepts to deepen their studies of institutional and subjective functioning. Departing from a German tradition in critical theory and in-depth hermeneutics as well as the English tradition from Tavistock and the development of psycho-social studies, there is a growing European interest in these approaches (Andersen, 2012; Redman, Bereswill, & Morgenroth, 2011; Salling Olesen, 2012).

We felt that a special issue aimed at making a broad range of researchers and those concerned with research practice aware of recent trends in psychoanalytically-informed research could lead to a deepening understanding of the roles of subjectivity in research practice, as well as of research methodologies to investigate these questions. The concept fit easily within the newly developed conceptual framework for the *Journal of Research Practice* involving a concept hierarchy consisting of six focus areas (Research Applications, Research Spaces, Research Education, Research Experiences, Research Philosophy, and Research on Research) along with subject areas, core questions, and keywords for each focus area, as it naturally intersects with several of these focus areas.

In developing this issue focusing largely, though not exclusively, on qualitative psychodynamic research, we are not intending in the least to contribute to the qualitative-quantitative split among researchers which we feel to be profoundly harmful to knowledge development. In recent years there has been an exciting blossoming of psychodynamically-oriented quantitative studies of psychotherapy, clinical conditions, personality, and psychoanalytic concepts. A psychodynamic research listserv bringing these researchers together—to which Stephen belongs—has existed for over a decade and now has over 600 members and new publications are sent out almost daily. This work using traditional quantitative methods is making valuable contributions in testing, refining, and extending psychodynamic concepts and practices (cf. Levy & Ablon, 2009; Shedler, 2010; Soldz & McCullough, 2000).

We view this issue, rather, as a complement to these more traditional works. In it we wanted to make the research community aware of the existent and developing perspectives on uses of researcher subjectivity arising out of psychoanalytic thinking that can enrich studies from many fields not otherwise intersecting with psychoanalytic thinking.

Articles in the Special Issue

In the first article “Interaction, Transference, and Subjectivity: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Fieldwork,” **Linda Lundgaard Andersen** situates fieldwork as one of the

significant methods in educational, social, and organisational research aiming at studying the culture of people. In fieldwork, researchers have to balance participation and observation in the attempt at accurate representation of social realities; these subject fieldwork to psychodynamic processes. Individual and interactional psychodynamics thus influence all phases of the research process, including data production, research questions and methodology, relations with informants, as well as the interpretation and analysis. The article illustrates how the psychoanalytical concepts of *transference* and *institutional transference* can provide insight into the dynamics and representation of efficiency and democracy being implemented in a number of Danish human service organisations.

Anne Liveng's contribution, "Why Do Care Workers Withdraw From Elderly Care? Researcher's Language as a Hermeneutical Key," focuses on the care relationship as activating our earliest memories of our own care relations, independently of whether we are in the role of care providers or care receivers. In seeking to understand an apparently contradictory empirical scene observed at an old people's home in Denmark, Liveng points to behavioral patterns of withdrawal as well as commitment from the care workers leading to identification of the phenomenon of "empathy at a distance." The analysis illustrates how working with dimensions of the researcher's subjectivity—in the format of the researcher's language as a hermeneutical key—it is possible to understand apparently irrational patterns appearing in the objects of the researcher's interest.

In "Surrendering to the Dream: An Account of the Unconscious Dynamics of a Research Relationship," **Jo Whitehouse-Hart** takes a case-study from a psychoanalytically informed media research project to explore conceptual, ethical, and methodological implications in research design. She explores the ideas of unconscious communication between interviewer and interviewee, the role of researcher's subjectivity, and the impact of unconscious defenses on the generation and interpretation of data. The author demonstrates how it is essential for researchers to be able to draw on their emotional as well as their cognitive experience to understand interview texts. This approach helped her overcome omnipotent defenses which worked against knowledge production, by surrendering emotionally to "dream communication" thus reaping the benefits of the creative approach that psychoanalysis is able to offer the empirical social researcher.

In "Autoethnography and Psychodynamics in Interrelational Spaces of the Research Process," **Birgitte Hansson** and **Betina Dybbroe** also point to the researcher's subjectivity as an integral part of the research process. Based on a research case from a study of peer support for people with mental illness, the authors discuss how the researcher can conduct introspection and at the same time reflect upon and analyze the central object of investigation. By combining a psychodynamic and an autoethnographic approach the researcher was able to venture into an introspection of not only interviews as texts, but also her own feelings, fantasies, and bodily experience leading to an interpretation process where the affective and experiential personal process became an important step.

Camilla Schmidt's contribution, "Using Psychodynamic Interaction as a Valuable Source of Information in Social Research" applies concepts relating to the

psychodynamics of interactions to understand how social and cultural dynamics are processed individually and collectively in narratives. By using a combination of interactionist and psychosocial theory in the analysis of an interview with a student of social education, the author demonstrates how the often conflicting demands and expectations of interviewees can be played out in the interrelational tension between the researcher and the interviewee or narrator. The article then demonstrates how such tensions and contradictions are valuable sources of information in understanding the process of becoming a professional social educator.

The article “A Psychoanalytic Approach to Fieldwork” by **Ellen Ramvi** focuses on what both psychoanalysis and ethnography have in common: the emphasis on the researcher’s own experience. While examining an ethnographic fieldwork experience the author illustrates how a psychoanalytical approach unfolds the material when studying successful and unsuccessful learning from experience among teachers in two Norwegian junior high schools. This approach also contains strong methodological implications. As Ramvi argues, the researcher’s struggle to remain open is essential to a fully elaborated data analysis. The term “openness” is situated as something broader than a principle for research practice. It is a way to relate both to the other and oneself, to emotions as well as actions, to the inner as well as the external world.

In “Practice-Near and Practice-Distant Methods in Human Services Research,” **Lynn Froggett** and **Stephen Briggs** discusses practice-near research in human services, which is a cluster of methods that may include thick description, intensive reflexivity, and the study of emotional and relational processes. Such methods aim to get as near as possible to experiences at the relational interface between institutions and the practice field. Psychoanalytically-informed approaches to research are particularly fruitful here. These are discussed in relation to the reflective practice and critical reflection traditions which have been widely discussed within social work, healthcare, education, and allied fields.

The article “Application of Work Psychodynamics to the Analysis of CEOs’ ‘Presentation of Self’: Resorting to an ‘Astute’ Clinical Methodology” by **Marisa Wolf-Ridgway** questions if work psychodynamics, a psychoanalytically-informed approach to studying workplace interactions, offers a relevant methodological framework for analyzing the psychological processes that come into play when a CEO is working. Starting from a “clinical” analysis of the CEOs’ “presentation of self,” the author presents an approach and an astute repertoire of tactics that transcends the traditional frameworks of work psychodynamics, in order to gain access to CEOs’ presentations of self. This combination, while methodologically unconventional, proved useful in ushering in new elements of knowledge that otherwise would have remained inaccessible. Notably, the specifics of the intersubjective relationship that was established between the author and each CEO exerted a major positive impact on the interpretations.

Sara Hueso’s contribution, “Connection and Disconnection: Value of the Analyst’s Subjectivity in Elucidating Meaning in a Psychoanalytic Case Study” reflects on pivotal concepts of psychoanalytic practice and theory as applied to the case of a psychoanalytic patient in order to create new meanings. Drawing from the concepts of *transference*,

countertransference and *projective identification*, the author presents the notion that the researcher's subjective reactions are created and induced by the subject of study precisely because this is one, and sometimes the only, way available to the subject to communicate something that is out of his or her full awareness. In essence, some unconscious material can be expressed nonverbally by the subject through provoking visceral and bodily reactions in the researcher, or in some cases, inducing psychic imagery such as dreams or fantasy. The material can be interpreted meaningfully by the researcher by receiving, containing, and sorting through these inchoate emotional reactions within him- or herself.

“Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis of Reported Dreams and the Problem of Double Hermeneutics in Clinical Research” by **Siamak Movahedi** argues that statistical analysis and hermeneutics are not mutually exclusive. Statistical analysis may capture some patterns and regularities, but the results of statistical methods of analysis are in themselves forms of data presentation requiring additional interpretations. This discussion is lodged within the context of a quantitative analysis of dream narratives involving psychoanalysts' exploration of patients' unconscious fantasies and patterns of object relationship as they emerged in dreams. These data were intended initially to examine the dialogical texts of reported dreams from a perspective ignoring the dialog. However, the author point to the need for returning to the dialogic contexts of desire and defense to make sense of statistical patterns.

The contribution “A Psychoanalytic Qualitative Study of Subjective Life Experiences of Women With Breast Cancer” by **Elvin Aydin, Bahadir M. Gulluoglu, and M. Kemal Kuscu** investigates the subjective life experiences of women with breast cancer from a psychoanalytic perspective. The authors suggest that taking into account the subjective intrapsychic processes of these women can provide researchers and healthcare professionals with useful insights. Drawing upon a systematic biographic method, their analysis reveals that subjects consider receiving the diagnosis of breast cancer as one of four major life events structuring the interpretations of their life courses. Even though these events are very different from each other, in terms of type and severity, the results indicate a common process in the way these life events are experienced by the participants.

And, finally, **Mardi J. Horowitz's** article “Self-Identity Theory and Research Methods” reviews the theory of personal identity in a manner that allows for specification of intrapsychic conflicts within an individual or cultural subgroup's overall self-organization. The author briefly reviews self-report methods and then focuses on narrative analytic methods. Use of mapping sentences in various scholarly contexts concludes the presentation.

We hope that these contributions will inspire other researchers from varied disciplines to expand their understanding of the roles that subjectivity, conscious and unconscious, plays in their research endeavors. This expansion of researchers' understanding of subjectivity, we believe, will enhance research practice.

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