

BOOK REVIEW

Researching Beneath the Surface: Psycho-Social Research Methods in Practice,
Simon Clarke and Paul Hoggett (Eds) London, Karnac, 2009

Reviewed by John Fellenor

Researching Beneath the Surface comprises a collection of eleven essays and sets out to offer an overview of key methodological issues in the burgeoning multi-disciplinary field of psychosocial research. It also seeks to contribute to the development of new research methodologies and is part of the ‘explorations in psycho-social studies’ series, by Karnac. Whilst the individual backgrounds of the authors are at once eclectic yet complementary, they are unified by their work with the Centre for Psychosocial Studies at the University of the West of England. An organisation sharing a commitment to ‘*psychoanalytic and other non-rationalist understandings of the human subject.*’¹

The present volume is structured into three fairly evenly divided sections. The significance of the ways in which psychosocial research frames itself is at once discernible in this structure in that each section doesn’t appear to represent a distinct topic area. Instead, recurrent themes run throughout the text; themes that in themselves attempt to construct the psychosocial as a coherent fabric. Whilst the opening chapter, ‘*Researching beneath the surface: a psycho-social approach to research methods and practice*’ by Simon Hoggett, positions the *reflexive practitioner* at the heart of psychosocial research, the theme of reflexivity, increasingly central to qualitative research per se, is recurrent.

Chapter 2, ‘*Experiencing knowledge: the vicissitudes of a research journey*’ by Haralan Alexandrov, focuses on epistemological, methodological and ethical issues raised by the psycho-social approach to the study of organisational culture; asking for example how can we establish a secure epistemological starting point in postmodernity. Chapter 3, ‘*How to live and learn: learning duration, and the virtual*’ by Lita Crociani-Windland seeks to outline fundamental convergences between

continental philosophy and the work of Bion and to account for the need of a particular methodology, where the complexity and relevance of lived experience and intuition in the research process is central.

The significance of reflexivity is afforded greater depth from the psychosocial viewpoint than in some qualitative methodologies with the premise of the *defended subjectⁱⁱ*, a term that seeks to capture the ways in which both researched *and* researcher are bound together by an unconscious dynamic structured through anxiety and the unconscious defences deployed to make this anxiety bearable. Here we find another recurrent theme: a psychoanalytically framed assertion that to move beyond discourse and surface descriptions of reality the researcher needs to work with and through this unconscious intersubjective substrate. Yet with this in mind, a niggling thought creeps in; discernible in the way that many of this book's authors return to the basic premises of psychoanalysis; the thought being whether *psychosocial* should be re-written as *psychoanalytical*?

Chapter 4, '*When words are not enough*' by Julian Manley, carries some of this concern; initially postulating the importance of developing a methodology that allows visual imagery to emerge as a research tool and determining to demonstrate this by charting how our concern with linguistics is rooted in Cartesian philosophy. A concern that leads us to conclude it is *content* rather than *process* that matters. I.e. that which can be seen and categorised becomes prioritised over the non-logical non-thinking process.

The chapter progresses through Spinoza's *affectⁱⁱⁱ*, discussed as a time-transcendent binding of mind and body, and founding upon this the question of where resides the *image* conjured up by the researcher looking at data; concluding that it is not just in the unconscious but in the affective fabric that shifts moment to moment. The author then describes a case study of a psychoanalytical playing-out; with the point of reference for analysis immanent in the encounter itself. Whilst this represents a fluid and less structured approach to psychoanalysis, the significant fact is *still* a memory or image of the past. This case study may be decried psychoanalytically on its lack of

structured approach and recourse to the tools of psychoanalysis, but this is exactly what Manley sets out to demonstrate and the other authors hint at: that [psycho]analysis is a process of becoming and not uncovering. Nonetheless, Manley's advocated approach still feels like a simulacrum of psychoanalysis; yet to morph into something distinct from that discipline and with its own form.

The anxiety/fear aspect of psychoanalysis, the other aspect of the defended subject, features highly in this volume. For instance, in Chapter 5, '*Charting the clear waters and the murky depths*', Phoebe Beedell reflects on the obstacles and experiences of a psychosocial researcher's engagement with their subject, arguing that emotional engagement is necessary and inescapable as a researcher. It also asks whether there's a cost involved in this and if so can/should we take something back? Chapter 6, '*Fear and psycho-social interviewing*' by Rosie Gilmour posits fear as underlining and permeating all modes of current Western thought; briefly referenced against Klein's paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions^{iv}. Gilmour then attempts to demonstrate the ubiquity of fear as 'inevitable' and 'normal' in general and in the interview context; utilising lots of quotes from respondents but failing to explicitly address or theorise the nature of their content. A psychoanalytically informed positioning of fear as a dynamic process may have helped here.

This middle section of the book is the one that challenges the psychosocial researcher's basic understanding and methodological premises. It forces the reader to carefully consider their own subjective starting point. Perhaps this is the book's success: un-self-conscious questioning of whether and how psychosocial methodology *can* embrace the unconscious and the psychoanalytical road into it, at the point where the psychic and the social meet.

Rumen Petrov, the author of chapter nine, 'wants to understand the 'magic' of autobiographical writing.' This was a most interesting chapter as it forces one to review cultural preconceptions and how we might understand what is *other*. Based on an autobiographical experience of the decline of communism and the concomitant trajectory of mental health in Bulgaria, this chapter reads as the rationalised narrative of what brought the author to research. But this is useful because it demonstrates how

we can intertwine such narratives with functional explications of psychosocial methods.

The final question regarding this book is *who is it for?*

The seasoned psychosocial advocate should approach the wide range of topics with a critical eye; taking the opportunity to question some of their own psychosocial assumptions. For example, is unconscious fear *actually* ubiquitous in our social encounters? Can we overplay reflexiveness? What governs our choice of metaphor and is it possible to convey more than our own experience through autobiographical writing?

The student new to psychosocial methods may struggle; feeling that they have been dropped into the middle of something qualitative but rather incoherent. It is because the area of psychosocial studies is relatively new and needs to further clarify itself; at present it lacks a bounded and precise methodology. Yet this in itself says much about the nature of psychosocial research that the present book will allow the student to glean: psychosocial methodologies *are* eclectic, innovative and ultimately seek the deepest understanding of the affective fabric we are part of.

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ⁱ website: <http://www.uwe.ac.uk/hlss/research/cpss/index.shtml> accessed 25.12.2009

ⁱⁱ Hollway, W. and Jefferson, T. (2000) *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: Free association, Narrative and the Interview Method*, London, Sage

ⁱⁱⁱ Spinoza, B. (1992) *Ethics, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect and Selected Letters*, Feldman, S. (Ed.), Shirley, S. (Trans.) Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett.

^{iv} Klein, M. (1946) Notes on some schizoid mechanisms. In Mitchell, J. (Ed.), *The Selected Melanie Klein* (pp.176-200). Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991