

Psycho-social writing from data

WENDY HOLLWAY

‘Unthought-like thoughts that are the souls of thoughts’

(Edgar Allan Poe, 1848, cited in Ogden 2004;1356)

Introduction

How can I work creatively with data: how can I use evidence in a way that is demonstrably valid and ethical while preserving the vitality of participants’ voices (Hollway 2009) and doing justice to the complexity of their transitions, throughout the research process until my representation reaches the audience/reader? These are questions that require a psycho-social epistemology; a new paradigm for theorising how researchers and readers/audience of naturalistic empirical research *know* what we encounter.

It has become a defining principle of my research to use (and transform) psychoanalytic ontology and epistemology to build an appropriate methodology (Hollway 2008), not tainted by old positivist principles that are still so often embedded in empirical social science research. The theme of researcher reflexivity is a useful launch pad for what I prefer to call ‘using one’s subjectivity as a research instrument’ⁱ and for tracking its implications for obdurate questions of validity, objectivity and ethics in research. I hope to show how socio-cultural themes are not excluded from the use of subjectivity that I am exploring. I am particularly indebted to Wilfred Bion’s theory of thinking (conjured in the epigram from Poe) which affords an epistemological route using the concepts of reverie, intuition and emotional experience (see Grotstein 2007).

After earlier attention to research design and data production, my current focus is on practices of data analysis and writing that convey the ‘becoming’ of first-time mothers, data derived from an empirical project on this identity transition. The projectⁱⁱ followed for a year eighteen women, in diverse circumstances, all located in the Tower Hamlets borough of London. Two psychoanalytically informed methods,

free association narrative interviewing and psychoanalytic observation, were supplemented with reflexive fieldnotes and a weekly observation seminar respectively, to provide structures for thinking about the data through attending to researcher subjectivity as an instrument of knowing. In my current book, provisionally titled *Mothers' Knowing/Knowing Mothers*, two themes are plaited together: how first-time mothers know their infants and, given that this knowledge is mainly tacit, how researchers can come to know about this research question. This focus opens onto a wider question about forms of knowing that are outside discourse, outside language (narrowly defined) and, in the history of Enlightenment ontology and epistemology, cast into the margins of the feminine other. Bracha Ettinger's 'matrixial' language (see Pollock 2008) opens up a prenatal/prematernal world of originary transsubjective experience that is not erased at birth. In what follows, I briefly introduce four such approaches to data analysis/writing.

Writing scenically

Here is a glimpse of a shift in the way I represent individual case data when writing an initial case summary. Two years ago, when I first wrote 'Jenny's' pen portrait, it began:

Jenny is black British, of African Caribbean heritage, and lives with her parents and three younger brothers in a council flat. When she discovered that she was pregnant, she was 17 and studying social sciences at sixth form college.

Recently, I began a 'scenic' introduction of Jenny as follows:

Jenny sits tensely in her bedroom, on the bunk bed. Clothes bulge from hangers on the top rail. Around the room are various soft toys and on the wall a couple of Bob Marley posters. She waits while her family's social worker, who she has known all her life, tells her parents the news: she is pregnant.

The move (which was gradual – for example, it was several versions before I left out 'seventeen year old') was influenced by the concept of 'scenic' from Alfred Lorenzer, the German cultural psychoanalyst in the Frankfurt School tradition (Bereswill, Morgenroth and Redman, 2010; Froggett and Hollway 2010). Lorenzer's 'scene'

refers to ‘an ongoing register of affective and embodied experience and meaning’ (Bereswill et al 2010: 225). Like a theatrical scene, it taps into a different mode of understanding – scenic understanding – that is more holistic, closer to tacit, unconscious knowing and capable of accessing societal-cultural unconscious knowledge. In this epistemology, unconscious knowledge is emphatically not synonymous with the personal or individual; ‘this autonomous level of meaning goes beyond the individual ... is social and collective in character’ (Bereswill et al op cit: 224).

I had started to feel critical of relying on social identity categories to characterise participants. While appearing to be an evidential way of describing someone, categorising individuals according to class, ethnicity, gender and age (categories that critical social science came to depend upon) risks reifying and representing them in socially determinist ways. At what point in what kind of data analysis do we need to know that Jenny is of African Caribbean origin? If we surmise this from the Bob Marley posters on her wall, is this more vivid and complex? Likewise, it is clear that she is young, otherwise the whole drama with her parents would not be taking place in the way this scene conjures up. Finding this out scenically ensures that the meaning of her age is part of the whole complex set of relations that make sense of her experience of the pregnancy. Scenic understanding involves latent meaning and ties subjective experience to social practice and cultural meaning. Heavy reliance on social identity categories tends towards a more systematised, abstract knowledge. Psycho-social researchers need both, but probably at different times: exclusively abstract formulations lose contact with emotional experience: in Lorenzer’s terms ‘the scenic animates our experience, rendering it subjectively meaningful and more alive’ (Bereswill et al: 234).

Presented with a scene, there are some things that might puzzle the reader/audience, for example why does the family have a social worker? The Bionian principle of living in uncertainty (famously derived from Keats’ idea of ‘negative capability’, Bion 1979: 125) is to hold the question open. In intellectual work the certainty afforded by a theoretical critique or dominant theoretical perspective can lead to premature closure, provide a form of thought control over unpredictability. Enid Balint (1993) using infant observational principles, described her method as

‘amassing facts and feelings about the facts at the same time’ (p3). It required ‘tolerating the absence of a consistent story’, ‘using muddle’, ‘using imagination’, but in the safety of structure and training (pp4 and 5). She addresses the role of inference in observation and counsels that the analyst must not infer too much from initial observations. Rather ‘they will stay in her mind latent, arousing curiosity and a kind of readiness to hear more, but must not obscure anything else’ (Balint 1993:11). To achieve this, the observer or analyst ‘must not guess’. This describes the balance that I am striving to achieve in data analysis and case writing, briefly illustrated through Jenny’s ‘scene’. I was influenced to move in this direction by the project’s use of the infant observation method (Urwin 2007; Hollway 2007) which:

requires a space in the mind where thoughts can begin to take shape and where confused experiences can be held in an inchoate form until their meaning becomes clearer. This kind of mental functioning requires a capacity to tolerate anxiety, uncertainty, discomfort, helplessness, a sense of bombardment (Rustin 1989: 20-21).

Both methods (Lorenzer’s in the Frankfurt school tradition and the infant observation seminar as practised at the Tavistock clinic) encourage the use of the researcher’s (or observer’s) experience of shock, provocation or irritation. As data analysts too, we can pay attention to our emotional experience of the material as part of discovering its meanings, simultaneously personal and socio-cultural. In group data analysis we followed the observation seminar practice of reading notes out loud, thereby recovering from transcript extracts some of the emotional experience that contributed to its impact. Once noticed, we could trace the societal-cultural meanings of our subjective responses (including their variations within the group) and weigh them against the experience of the participant (Urwin 2007: 245).

Rough verse

In qualitative data analysis, transcript has tended to become reified as the only reliable expression of participants’ accounts and the only valid form of evidence. Instead, in one case analysis, I composed a prose poem trying to convey the emotional and rhythmic qualities in Juhana’s interview account, along with the gripping content of her story. The poet Ted Hughes found that it was ‘rough verse’ that best preserved

‘the fresh simple presence of the experience’. When, in his journal, he ‘happened’ to write in rough verse he ‘at once discovered something that surprised me. In verse, not only did I seem to move at once deeper and more steadily into reliving the experience, but every detail became much more important’ⁱⁱⁱ.

The first verse consists of Juhana’s words, chosen to signal central themes in her story:

Mum’s over the moon.
Their first granddaughter (that’s on both sides)
My hubby and me, we wanted to name her after me.
She’s like the queen, all her needs are served.
I always wanted a little girl
It’s like a little you, I love that about her.
Me, the eldest sister too.
I love dressing her up.

My aim in selecting and arranging material from Juhana’s three interviews, supplemented with information from the observation data, was to represent her changes within the complex whole of her arrangements; familial, cultural, spatial, financial and employment. Inspired by the idea of an Alan Bennett monologue, I arranged for the prose poem to be read by a trained actor, who prepared herself by listening to the interview audio record, so as to reproduce faithfully Juhana’s voice (‘voice’ in the broad sense of conveying a person’s ‘idiom’; Bolla 1987). (Because voice is as unique to the person as the face, use of an actor afforded anonymity.) To judge for yourself its success in conveying Juhana’s experience of becoming a mother, listen to a recording [[click here](#)]. Think about the scenic quality of your knowing Juhana and consider what kind of data analysis might appropriately follow.

Intimate voices

The third new form I tried out was in my representation of ‘Zelda’ through imagining the voices of those close to her – her best friend, mother and husband. The following captures the way she used to talk to her baby before he could talk, as recorded by the observer. Different information about and images of Zelda were afforded by the

interview and observation data (Hollway 2007) and I wanted to combine them by going beyond the limitations of each. It also enabled me to represent the rapid almost breathless flow of speech that typified Zelda:

Come on, up you come. Oh I think you need your nappy changing. Shall we do it here or on the changing table? Ok, just a moment while I get the things. Oh your skin is so dry and sore, I'll ask the doctor for a new cream when we go next week. I'm sorry, I know you hate this cream, but it's got to be done. Your skin reacts to everything, doesn't it. Like that courgette last week - what a fiery rash that was. That's the last time I'll be feeding you courgette. It's so hard with all this uncertainty to manage. I keep saying to your Papa, I need a plan and he says 'I don't know, we don't know yet'. Oh, I know he's right, but it's very hard. I daren't get too excited in case it doesn't work out. We can do nothing here my boy, can't have another baby, we have to go back home before we can do anything.

This form drew from the careful attention to detail of the trained infant observer who visited Zelda weekly for almost a year (Pluckrose 2007), whose notes are consistent with scenic principles. Perhaps Zelda could engage in a kind of reverie as she spoke to a pre-semantic infant who nonetheless would have been in the kind of relation to his mother that Bion characterises as communicative projective identification. Dreaming (both waking and sleeping) inform my next approach.

Matrixial language and social dreaming

I have recently shifted focus to explore, through a dreamlike compilation of many mothers' voices [[click here](#) for an example of one of these ^{iv}], the perinatal period, which I approach through the 'matrixial' language of Bracha Ettinger, who treats prenatal and postnatal life as affording continuity of transsubjective experience despite the radical caesura of birth (Pollock 2008). Even with psychoanalytically-informed methods, I faced the ineffability of pre- and peri-natal experience (signalled by interviewees' use of the word 'weird' to describe feeling the first internal movements and seeing the new life *in utero* via scan technology). Motherhood discourses, instances of language in its phallogocentric form, are incapable of representing the transsubjective stratum of subjectivity that is neither two nor one

(Hollway in preparation). Was there a method that could be consistent with experiences that I recognised as being radically outside discourse?

I organised a workshop for psycho-social researchers interested in social dreaming as a research method^v:

Whereas Individual, Therapeutic Dreaming has the Dreamer as the focus of attention, follows an egocentric path by concentrating on issues of self knowledge by dramatizing the personal biography and occurs *within* the clinical situation, Social Dreaming follows a different orientation. It focuses on the dream by holding a socio-centric view-point. It is knowledge of the environment that is important, as individuals face the tragedy, and comedy, of being. This is *outside* the clinical situation. (Lawrence and Biran 2002:224, cited in Lawrence 2010: 3)

The workshop began on Friday night when we listened, together, to the compilation of perinatal voices from the data. Next morning, the first session began with the standard impersonal question “what is the first dream?” and the session flowed as a series of dreams and associations to dreams, picking up shared meanings not individual histories. The following is one example (the 7th dream):

I was in a huge, really bright, green field. There were a herd of cows and calves. They were looking at our quad bike. There was a man driving the quad bike. He drove into the calves in the herd. The calves were jumping up and I noticed their hind legs were like robot legs. Suddenly, I saw the biggest bull I had ever seen. The man on the quad was laughing and tormenting the calves. The bull hit us side on. I was flying off the bike and I woke up.

Notes from the workshop sessions provide a source of data that eschews interpretation in favour of association^{vi}, thus proceeding according to principles of tacit and latent knowing. Social dreaming is explicitly based on Bion’s theory of thinking in which reverie enables subjective fantasies to emerge and is key to creative thinking. Like Lorenzer’s ‘scenic understanding’, it proceeds on the basis that dream thought and reverie, albeit personal, contain socio-cultural meaning.

While Bion's theory of thinking was not aiming for a psycho-social perspective, it does afford a radical, relational, non-positivist epistemology, privileging intuition, reverie and emotional experience, on which to found research practice based on using subjectivity as an instrument of *psycho-social* knowing. A similar psychoanalytically informed epistemology also underpins scenic understanding, social dreaming and evidence-based imaginative forms of writing. In different ways, all these approaches recast the Freudian psychoanalytic unconscious, emphasising embodied, affective and unthought known encounters that occur in between^{vii} subjectivity and socio-cultural life. The use of researcher subjectivity, central to these approaches, affords psycho-social researchers the opportunity of discovering, at the heart of research relations, the socio-cultural and collective character of their participants' experiences and meanings.

Wendy Hollway is Professor of Social Psychology at the Open University. She has researched and published widely on questions to do with identity, gender relations, parenting, the capacity to care, qualitative methodology and epistemology, history of psychology. Her current Fellowship "Maternal Identities, Care and Intersubjectivity" develops an earlier ESRC-funded study (with Ann Phoenix) about the identity transition involved when women become mothers for the first time and is based on psychoanalytically-informed interview and observation methods. It takes further her work on theorising identity processes and new methodological approaches for researching identities. Other interests include social dreaming, sculpting wood, walking, Eastern body and spiritual practices.

Email: w.hollway@open.ac.uk

REFERENCES

- Balint, E. (1993) *Before I was I*. London: Free Association Books.
- Bion, W.R. (1970) *Attention and Interpretation*. London: Maresfield.
- Bollas, C. (1989) *Forces of Destiny: Psychoanalysis and the human idiom*. London: Free Association Books.

Bereswill, M., Morgenroth, C. and Redman, P. (2010) 'Alfred Lorenzer and the depth hermeneutic method' (Guest Editors) *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* 15,3 pp 221-250. Special issue.

Froggett, L. and Hollway, W. (2010) 'Psychosocial research analysis and scenic understanding', *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, 15,3 pp281-301.

Grotstein, James (2007) *An Intense Beam of Darkness: the Legacy of Wilfred Bion*. London: Karnac.

Hollway, W. (2007) Afterword, *Infant Observation* 10(3): 331-336.

Hollway, W. (2008) 'The importance of relational thinking in the practice of psychosocial research: ontology, epistemology, methodology and ethics.' Chapter 7 in S. Clarke, P. Hoggett and H. Hahn (eds) *Object relations and social relations*. 137-162. London: Karnac.

Hollway, W. (2009) 'Applying the 'experience-near' principle to research: psychoanalytically informed methods', *British Journal of Social Work Practice*, 23 (4) pp.461-474.

Hollway, W. (in preparation) 'Maternal preoccupation in matrixial perspective', to be submitted to *Feminism and Psychology*.

Hughes, Ted 'The Spoken Word'. British Library Sound Archive 2008.

Lawrence, W.G. (2010) *The Creativity of Social Dreaming*. London: Karnac.

Lawrence, W.G. and Biran, H. (2002) 'The complementarity of social dreaming and therapeutic dreaming'. In Neri, C., Pines, M. and Friedman, R. eds. *Dreams in Group Psychotherapy*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Ogden, T. (2004) 'On holding and containing, being and dreaming', *Int. J. Psychoanalysis* 85: 1349-64.

Pluckrose, E. (2007) 'Loss of the Motherland: the dilemma of creating triangular space a long way from home'. *Infant Observation* 10(3): 307-318.

Pollock, G. (2008) 'Mother Trouble', *Studies in the Maternal*, 1
www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk/back_issues/issue_one/GriseldaPollock.pdf

Rustin, Margaret (1989) in Miller, L., Rustin, M.E., Rustin, M.J. and Shuttleworth, J. (eds) *Closely Observed Infants*. London: Duckworth.

Urwin, C. (2007) Doing infant observation differently? Researching the formation of mothering identities in an inner London borough. *Infant Observation* 10(3): 239–251.

Winnicott, D.W. (1971) *Playing and Reality*. London: Routledge.

ⁱ I probably first encountered this idea in Jennifer Hunt's (1989) *Psychoanalytic Aspects of Fieldwork*, where she uses the phrase 'researcher's self as the primary instrument of inquiry' (for example p13).

ⁱⁱ ESRC-funded project under the Identities programme 'Identities in process: Becoming mothers in Tower Hamlets', Wendy Hollway, Ann Phoenix, Heather Elliott, Cathy Urwin and Yasmin Gunaratnam. Followed by ESRC Fellowship 'Maternal Identities, Care and Intersubjectivity'.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ted Hughes 'The Spoken Word: Poems and short stories'. 2008, The British Library Board and BBC.

^{iv} This clip of one voice from the thirteen 'social dreaming voices' selection has been edited using software that disguises voices to achieve anonymity of participant's identity.

^v Gordon Lawrence, the inventor of the Social Dreaming Matrix, led the workshop, 'social dreaming as a research method'.

^{vi} Likewise Lorenzer 'was particularly critical of approaches that, instead of attending to the ways in which a text works on or plays with a reader's subjective experience (unconscious and otherwise), impose on it a psychoanalytic interpretation, as it were, from the outside' (Bereswill *et al* 2010: 223).

^{vii} Winnicott's 'transitional space' is a further instance of psychoanalysis' formulation of a different register of knowing (Winnicott 1971).