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Understanding feelings: Engaging with unconscious communication and embodied knowledge

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ABSTRACT

The field of emotional geographies raises challenging methodological questions about how researchers produce knowledge about the feelings of others. Countering scepticism about the methodological possibilities of psychoanalysis, I argue for and illustrate its potential. Drawing on a single research interview, I show how psychoanalytic ideas about unconscious communication can be used to help to make sense of emotional dimensions of research interviews and the narratives they generate. I introduce the idea of the "receptive unconscious", which I connect with the building of trust and the concept of rapport. Turning to transference communications, I clarify the different ways in which researchers and clinicians work with unconscious communications. I revisit debates about empathy, which I distinguish from identification and link to the counter-transference. I show how my embodied, affective response during and after the interview gave me clues that eventually furthered my understanding of emotional dimensions of the interviewee's narrative. This analysis contributes to methodological debates about researching emotional geographies and to discussions of the methodological uses of psychoanalysis in social research. Rather than construing psychoanalytical methodologies as highly specialist and intrinsically different from generic qualitative research practice, it seeks to illustrate their potential in relation to critical forms of reflexivity well-attuned to understanding felt experience.

1. Introduction

How is it possible to know how another person feels? Researchers interested in emotional geographies as a terrain that engages with people's subjective experience necessarily face this question. We know very well that what people say they feel bears a complex and problematic relationship to their embodied subjective experiences. There is an inevitable inarticulacy to feelings, which is lost when they are described in words (Harrison, 2007). Moreover, people's accounts of their feelings are profoundly shaped by the conditions in which they are rendered or performed (McDowell, 1992). And yet surely there is no better source of knowledge about people's feelings than the people concerned (compare Hitchings, 2012)?

This dilemma has generated a variety of methodological innovations, many of which seek to go beyond talk of feelings (Crang, 2003; Davies and Dwyer, 2007). These innovations have included occasional uses of psychoanalytic ideas (for example Bennett, 2009; Blazek, 2013; Bingley, 2003; Bondi, 2003a, b, 2005a; Burgess et al., 1988a, b; Healy, 2010; Kingsbury, 2010; Nast, 2000; Pardy, 2011; Pile, 1991, 2010a; Proudfoot, 2010; Sibley, 2003; Thomas, 2007, 2011; Wilton, 2003). However, the explicit use of psychoanalysis remains relatively rare and perhaps marginal within emotional geographies. In this paper I argue for the potential relevance of aspects of psychoanalytic thinking about unconscious communication for understanding people's feelings relationally and for comprehending something of the affective tenor of their narratives. In so doing, I also extend ways of understanding the unconscious currently circulating in the field of psychoanalytic geographies. I develop my argument through discussion of a single research interview, which serves to illustrate some ways in which feelings are communicated non-verbally and non-cognitively through interview encounters, and in relation to which I reflect on how researchers might use such unconscious forms of communication. Before turning to the interview and my analysis of how my interviewee communicated and I communicated (some of) our feelings to one another, I review methodological debates about psychoanalysis in and around the field of emotional geographies, identifying key challenges and difficulties I seek to address through this worked example.

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2. Psychoanalytic methodologies

In a paper published more than two decades ago, Steve Pile (1991) argued for the relevance of psychoanalytic ideas to the practise of interpretive human geography. According to Pile (1991: 460), geographers have been much "interested in the archaeology of knowledge and language" and it could only be a matter of time before we turned to psychoanalysis as "the archaeology of the mind" (Pile, 1991: 460). He focused specifically on parallels between psychoanalytic and research relationships, describing them both as inter-subjective scenes, in which participants are drawn into complex multi-layered alliances. He suggested that we might use psychoanalytic ideas about the unconscious dynamics of transference and counter-transference to deepen and enrich the practise of qualitative methods. I address his challenge in this paper.

Although Pile's paper has been cited in many subsequent discussions of qualitative methods in human geography, researchers have not flocked to psychoanalytic ideas in the way that he envisaged. While renewed interest in psychoanalytic methodologies has become evident very recently, for example in a recent special issue of *The Professional Geographer* (Healy, 2010; Kingsbury, 2010; Proudfoot, 2010; Thomas, 2010; Pile, 2010a), contributors have themselves acknowledged that "many geographers are sceptical about the value and viability of psychoanalytic methodology" (Kingsbury, 2010: 519; also see Kingsbury, 2009). I draw out and critically examine three strands of this scepticism, concerned with power relations, expertise and ways of knowing respectively. In relation to each I offer counter-arguments.

First, despite Pile's (1991) efforts to trace a shift within psychoanalysis away from an authoritarian view of the psychoanalytic relationship towards a much more egalitarian one, this was not sufficient to dispel a widespread view of psychoanalysis as a highly unequal enterprise in which patients are very vulnerable to abuses of power (Parr, 1998). In relation to methodological debates, one of the most influential sources of the authoritarian view of the psychoanalytic relationship has been Ann Oakley's (1981) critique of the power relations of traditional approaches to interviewing: for Oakley, the psychoanalytic interview epitomised the problem she sought to expose and challenge. Ensuing discussion of interviewing in and beyond human geography (especially among those informed by feminism) has expressed much concern regarding the risk of reproducing or reinforcing pre-existing social inequalities within the research process (England, 1994; McDowell, 1992; Moss, 2006). Although psychoanalytic approaches are barely mentioned within these discussions, Oakley's account is cited so frequently that at least implicitly her view of psychoanalysis remains unchallenged. In this context it is reasonable to infer that the dominant view of psychoanalytic approaches presumes them liable, or even likely, to constitute sophisticated methods for manipulating or subtly disempowering research subjects, or for doing violence to their stories.

Perhaps most problematic for social researchers attentive to the power relations of research is the possibility that psychoanalytic approaches encourage researchers to lay claim to knowledge that remains unknown to their research participants. Such psychoanalytically-based knowledge claims are suggested in some contributions to the nascent field of psychosocial studies pioneered by social psychologists, including Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson (2000), Valerie Walkerdine and her colleagues (2001) and Simon Clarke and Paul Hoggett (2009). For example, in their classic text *Doing Qualitative Research Differently*, Hollway and Jefferson (2000) made extensive use of the psychoanalytic concept of unconscious defences, describing their research interviewees as "defended subjects". Although they also emphasised the collaborative co-construction of narratives within interviews, to describe research participants as "defended subjects" implies that researchers know something about the personalities and emotional lives of research participants that the latter are unable to acknowledge themselves. While other contributions to psychosocial studies have problematised the self-knowledge of the researcher as much as that of their participants (for example Gadd, 2004), the representation of research participants as "defended subjects" has tended to reinforce a dominant view of psychoanalytic approaches as likely to disempower participants and as failing to trouble the power dynamics of research. But, as Pile's (1991) account sought to argue, the supposed authority of the (knowledge of the) psychoanalyst has been troubled within psychoanalysis. In this context, my aim in this paper is modest: I seek to show how psychoanalytic ideas can be used to support the researcher's use of reflexivity in ways that are sensitive to the power dynamics of interviews, that position researchers as witnesses rather than as authorities and that elaborate methodologically a relational approach to emotion for which I and others have argued (Bondi, 2005a; Bennett, 2009; Evans, 2012).

A second strand of scepticism arises from the status of psychoanalysis as a clinical practice, which has prompted unease about the competence of anyone without clinical training to use psychoanalytic methods (Bingley, 2003; Oliver, 2003). Discussing methodological approaches to studying emotion in social research, Janet Holland (2007) has presented the use of psychoanalytic methods as highly specialist and as requiring dedicated training. Holland equated psychoanalytic approaches with what has become known as psychosocial studies to which I have referred. Contributors to psychosocial studies concur with her view, and present their work as encompassing a distinctive methodological approach uniquely placed to explore the interface between psychology and sociology, including questions of emotion (for example Clarke and Hoggett, 2009). Such claims do not encourage those without specialist training to explore psychosocial studies and it has not made much impact within emotional geographies.

In these circumstances a continuing reluctance to engage with psychoanalytic methods is, perhaps, not surprising. However others have argued rather differently. For example Paul Kingsbury (2010: 520) has challenged the mystique that sometimes appears to accrue to psychoanalytic methods, and on his account psychoanalysis has already had a substantial but largely unacknowledged influence on a wide variety of methodological debates in human geography, rendering it "at once central yet marginal, influential yet rebuffed". He has sought to situate "psychoanalytic methodology beyond the couch" (ibid. 520), tracing, for example, the spatialities of desire made available through the adoption (via Zizek, 1989, 2006) of Lacan's notion of the *objet petit a* (Kingsbury, 2010; also see Kingsbury, 2003, 2009). Elsewhere I too have argued that at least some aspects of the psychoanalytic practice are simply refinements of ordinary social skills, which can be developed and deployed by those without clinical training (Bondi, 2003a, 2005a). In this paper I develop that line of argument further, focussing specifically on matters of emotion as they are communicated unconsciously, and I suggest when and how researchers might usefully draw on others with clinical experience.

Third, Pile's (1991) engagement with psychoanalytic ideas led him to call upon interviewers and interviewees to talk about what goes on between them, and to disclose their respective assumptions about each other. His exhortation to interviewers to "talk about it" with their interviewees (ibid., 465) implied a view of the unconscious as relatively easily and unproblematically knowable by subjects willing to engage in self-reflection. This appeal to open communication and self-reflexivity has since been subject to considerable and sustained criticism. Linda McDowell (1992: 408), for example, found Pile's argument "highly dubious" and his