

This article was downloaded by: [Institute of Education]

On: 14 November 2012, At: 03:23

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## International Journal of Social Research Methodology

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tsrm20>

### Research encounters, reflexivity and supervision

Heather Elliott <sup>a</sup>, Joanna Ryan <sup>a</sup> & Wendy Hollway <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Faculty of Social Sciences, Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, UK

Version of record first published: 09 Sep 2011.

To cite this article: Heather Elliott, Joanna Ryan & Wendy Hollway (2012): Research encounters, reflexivity and supervision, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 15:5, 433-444

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2011.610157>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

## Research encounters, reflexivity and supervision

Heather Elliott, Joanna Ryan and Wendy Hollway\*

*Faculty of Social Sciences, Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, UK*

*(Received 20 January 2011; final version received 1 August 2011)*

Reflexivity in qualitative and ethnographic social science research can provide a rich source of data, especially regarding the affective, performative and relational aspects of interviews with research subjects. This paper explores by means of three case examples different ways of accessing and using such reflexivity. The examples are drawn from an empirical psycho-social study into the identity transitions of first-time mothers in an inner-city multicultural environment. Fieldnotes and supervision were used to engage with researcher subjectivity, to enhance the productive use of reflexivity and to address the emotional work of research. The methodology of the supervision was psychoanalytic, in its use of a bounded frame and of psychoanalytic forms of noticing oneself, of staying engaged emotionally as well as creating a reflective distance. The examples illustrate how this can enhance the knowledge gained about the research subjects.

**Keywords:** psycho-social; first-time mothers; researcher subjectivity; emotional work; psychoanalysis; research ethics; uncertainty; fieldnotes; contract research

### Introduction

Reflexivity in qualitative research is increasingly seen as a resource for understanding data that are embodied, unspoken or unavailable to consciousness (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009; Henwood, 2008). One enduring focus of methodological writing has been researchers' experience of the research encounter, how they feel and how they listen (Back, 2007; Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, & Kemmer, 2001; Hunt, 1989; Kleinman, 1991) – what they are able to hear and notice. The research encounter can be conceptualised as a co-created space such that the researcher and the research activity are seen as part of the production of knowledge (Frosh, 2010), with research subjects being '... reflexively constituted between the researcher and the researched' (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003, p. 423).

Butler's (2005) '*Giving an account of oneself*' is relevant to this turn to reflexivity in research. She argues that every narrative takes place within a scene of address to another, and that such accounts of oneself are always necessarily limited in their coherence and completeness by the conditions of opacity and excess that are part of the constitution of the 'I', its formation through others in language. She underlines the dual nature of the self-disclosing speech act (of which interviewees' accounts are a prime example), the ways in which communication about oneself both conveys narrative information and also functions to express desire and to act upon

---

\*Corresponding author. Email: w.hollway@open.ac.uk

the scene of interlocution itself. These latter are the affective, relational and performative aspects of speech. Reflexivity encompasses attention to these embodied aspects, as well as to other non-speech features of the context, setting and research process.

Butler also argues that an ethical position (one that does not do violence to the other or oneself) involves accepting that any account is necessarily partial, is always provisional and open to question. Such a position underlines the importance in research of not wrapping up data too quickly, and persisting with aspects that may disturb or conflict with prior assumptions, as Knowles (2006) exemplifies.

Here we explore some of the methodological questions provoked by the use of reflexivity.<sup>1</sup> We illustrate how we access and understand it. How does one become sufficiently aware of oneself in the fieldwork process to work in this way? How does one make reflexive data available to others? And, importantly, how can the emotional work involved in undertaking reflexive work be acknowledged and supported?

We consider three case examples to illustrate how fieldnotes and supervision can contribute to an engagement with researcher subjectivity and how these various forms of reflexivity can be used to further research knowledge. These examples are taken from an empirical psycho-social study into the identity transition involved when women become mothers for the first time (BaM).<sup>2</sup> The fieldwork of concern here involved free association narrative interviews. The mothers were interviewed three times over 1 year. One aim was to learn about the embodied, unconscious, taken-for-granted and practical aspects of identity formation. Psychoanalytic ideas and methodology, drawn from object relations and relational schools, were part of the theoretical resources.

Interview records were supplemented by reflexive field notes, written soon after each interview. These described in detail the setting and aspects of the research interaction that took place outside the audio record. They also recorded the interviewer's subjective responses to the setting and the interview relationship.<sup>3</sup> A small sum was budgeted for 'non-clinical supervision' for the researcher, Heather. The supervisions began at the start of the fieldwork, around 6 months into the project.

Supervision provided a space, separate from the main team, where all aspects of researcher subjectivity could be thought about and explored for their meaning and relevance. Data extracts and fieldnotes furnished the material on which to base these reflections. Supervision also addressed the emotional demands of the reflexive use of self. Research of this kind can involve exposure to highly emotive experiences, as Jervis (2009) and Beedell (2009) illustrate. The emotional work involved in creating, sustaining and then ending, intense, short-term field relationships is generally unrecognised and undervalued (Goode, 2006; Hubbard et al., 2001). We discuss below the implications of this for contract researchers working reflexively. In the present project the main researcher, herself a mother of young children and living in the fieldwork site, had many perceived similarities with the interviewees. As a white woman, interviewing women from different ethnic backgrounds there were also perceived dissimilarities. The methodology of the project provided ways in which both these, with their complexities of identification and disidentification, could be productively used as contributions to reflexivity (Elliott, 2011).

This paper brings together elements of two disciplinary methodologies: ethnography and psychoanalysis. The project had free associative thinking at its core, including in its interview methods (see Hollway, 2008; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000), and the supervision drew on psychoanalytic skills of listening and noticing, and on

ways of allowing oneself to be affected by the other whilst also maintaining a reflective distance.

### Case examples

The following three examples of research interaction, described through fieldnotes and material from supervision sessions, are written in the first person of the researcher to retain the aliveness of the engagement with the subjectivity of the researcher in her encounter with each mother, at the same time as showing aspects of the subsequent reflection process. Reflections are in the historic present tense. The examples here tell stories of the unexpected, of ruptures in fieldwork, and sometimes of seeming failure. As such they lay bare the performative aspects of the research interview and how the pressure of what needs to be delivered can get in the way of listening to and seeing what is there (Back, 2007; Butler, 2005).

This focus can be uncomfortable as it exposes the petty, the unprofessional and the self-interested aspects of research practice, which are usually edited out of findings. Such exposure puts great demands on the researcher's capacity for non-defensiveness in the public gaze, sidelining as it does all the more 'successful' work. It can also be argued that the emphasis on the researcher's subjectivity diverts attention from the researched, the proper subject of fieldwork. However, the researcher's feelings, biography and task impact on what and how s/he hears, whether this is acknowledged or not. Indeed, it is cultivating an awareness of these aspects of research that enables us 'to hold accounts of social life in place without folding the person one is listening to back into oneself' (Back, 2007, p. 159).

All quotations from fieldnotes are in italics.

### Sylvia

Sylvia is a white woman in her late 20s and living with her partner. Our first interview took place a few days before the birth of her daughter. Sylvia had just started maternity leave, earlier than planned because the birth was to be induced, after Sylvia had self-diagnosed a medical problem. She had called me to bring the interview forward and was very accommodating at this busy time, reflecting how keen she was to take part in the project. She talked steadily throughout, relating her difficult story in a *smooth, unruffled* way.

Some way through the interview, I ask about Sylvia's mother, noticing that she had not mentioned her after talking at length about the rest of her family. She tells me that her mother committed suicide when Sylvia was in her mid-teens, a year after her father had left the family to live with his current partner. Sylvia and her younger sister went to live with separate relatives. I note that *Sylvia referred to it delicately: her mother taking her own life, passing away. The information came into the interview lightly and did not dominate it.*

Sylvia has a long-term health problem. Although she is *unruffled*, I note that her family and people around her are concerned on her behalf. *Partner worried about her health: (her condition) and labour, etc. She seemed touched and surprised that he was: I was surprised that she seems totally unconcerned (...). Father taking practical, detailed interest in baby and pregnancy. Sister also worrying on her behalf: anxiety about labour pains.*

At the end of the interview I note that *I felt totally unengaged with her*. However, I am far from indifferent to her. After the interview, I take the highly unusual step of emailing my colleagues on the research team, suggesting that she does not fit the sample profile and maybe we should consider finding a replacement. I am reluctant to interview her again. It is only on reflection that I can make sense of this rejecting reaction.

In supervision, we discuss my assumption that Sylvia would be worried about her health and why I find it significant to note that she is not. We also discuss my reaction to Sylvia: the disengagement and my striking reluctance to interview her again. Jo wonders if I am resisting worrying on Sylvia's behalf, as I notice other members of her family doing. She also emphasises, based on her clinical experience, the likely importance of the suicidal dead mother in Sylvia's passage to becoming a mother. We discuss this in the context of the wider sample too and I note that I often come away from interviews wondering how mothers will cope and/or drained from listening to the mothers' stories at this intense time of their lives. The example of Sylvia highlights the emotional work I have been unaware that I have been undertaking.

When we review my fieldnote, Jo draws out the following detail I included. *I left about 6.15: street felt very quiet and rather eerie: passed a morgue. When I had been there during the day, it was busy and bustling.* Jo encourages me to think about what is driving my selection of this point. I realise that, although I have responded to Sylvia's lead in not letting the information about her mother's death dominate the interview, it has disturbed me and containing my reaction in the interview has taken some effort, which spills out into feelings of eeriness in the street and also my subsequent email to the team suggesting Sylvia was not suitable for the sample. Until this point I have not let myself recognise these feelings. We also discuss the dissonance I feel between the content of the material (the absence of Sylvia's mother and the tensions in Sylvia's relationship with her father) and her light tone.

Here supervision helped process the disturbing effect of the interview, allowing me not to act on my immediate reactions, but consider what they might mean. This material is an example of how the anxiety arising from emotionally charged issues for the mother (own mother's death, her health problems, which she feared would affect her unborn baby) can be projected into others, with varying consequences but allowing the mother to remain seemingly *unruffled*. This is an example of how the unconscious aspects of emotional communication are as much part of the emotional work of research as the more conscious ones. My fieldnotes as well as discussion in supervision allow us to see how this happens, to detoxify its impact, and forestall any unhelpful reactions. Disentangling the various strands allows me to see the mother in a more separate and thus more objective way. This is an example of Sandra Harding's (1991) 'subjective (or strong) objectivity' (Henwood, 2008).

### ***Nilá***

Nilá is a Bangladeshi woman in her early 20s. The midwife who identified her for recruitment told me (Heather) 'to get in touch quickly and to be positive', which created the expectation of some ambivalence. Our first interview takes place three weeks before Nilá's son was born, in a corner of the kitchen at her in-laws' house, where she lives with her husband and nine other adults. The family is preparing lunch

throughout. I am aware that I am likely to be inconveniencing the family and taking up space in a home without much, including for Nila. The interview seems constrained, compared to other interviews. *I felt wrongfooted, asking more questions than I had before, they did not seem to be the right questions to get her talking...* Reflecting later, I first of all associate the shortcomings in the interview with our differences around ethnicity and age and the challenges of working with these.

My comment about not asking the *right* questions indicates that I am feeling anxious about getting a certain kind of data from the interview and I am less open to the rich embodied data that I do have, which are central to the project. The problem, which we work with in supervision, is how to make sense of this unarticulated, embodied material and how to make visible and usable the kind of knowing from experience that comes with research encounters. We attempt to identify, without coming to overhasty conclusions, the sources of difficulty experienced in this interview, which only become clearer subsequently. We look at the possibility that it is too easy to ascribe the difficulties I experienced only to difference, rather than to take account of the crowded context, and to acknowledge there may have been other sources of inhibition for Nila that we do not as yet know about.

Preparing for the second interview, I am able to draw on the considerable knowledge within the research team about interviewing across cultural difference, as well as my own fieldwork experience over more than a decade of research. In addition, we discuss the case with our project advisory group, which includes professionals working within the diverse communities of Tower Hamlets as well as academics with experience of researching diversity. Together, we reflect on the constraints of space and the etiquette of Nila inviting someone else into her in-laws' home. Following guidance from the reference group, I offer Nila the option of holding the interview in a room at a newly opened Children's Centre. She accepts.

Although we had confirmed the arrangements on the morning of the interview, Nila does not turn up or call. When I phone I find out from her sister-in-law that Nila has had to take her baby to a doctor's appointment she had forgotten about when we spoke a couple of hours earlier. When we do have our interview the following day, I am concerned that again *'I got a fuzzy picture, nothing very specific... This felt like an interview which had not worked'*.

However, I do note a moment when I am able to identify with her. Nila has left her baby at home and he is unhappy: *her phone started buzzing almost as soon as we started. She checked her phone and ignored it; then took two or possibly three calls. For a while she looked like the essence of torn and juggling. Telling her story with an eye on the phone.* I said she must take the calls and do whatever she needed to do. Writing up my notes I think of *dropping off my younger son with his childminder this morning, the need to go and the need to stay. Never being entirely in one place. The feelings around getting calls from home on the mobile.* These moments of connection help me recognise the challenges Nila faced in negotiating the complexities of her life as a new mother and her responsibilities within an extended family. I also recognise, with hindsight, that the arrangements I had offered to make our meeting easier may have made things more difficult for her.

Supervision helped in discovering ways not to discount material that feels like failure but rather to accept the interview non-defensively and work with it. This is characteristic of psycho-social and reflexive research (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Thomson, 2009; Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001). By acknowledging and



containing the anxieties about the data I was gathering, outside the pragmatics of project delivery, the phenomena of the interview could be looked at both from the point of view of my acquisition of the methodology and also of the contexts of the mother herself, and what this might mean.

The third interview takes place when Nila's son is one year old, in a flat she has recently moved to with her husband and son. Things seem to have shifted enough in Nila's circumstances and between us for this interview to feel qualitatively different from the others. I conclude, somewhat ambivalently, that *I am relieved to have got to the end with her – that she has stayed in the sample.*

Holding the interview in Nila's own home seems to help create focus and space. The greater openness of this interview recasts my understanding of Nila. My previous sense of her has been shaped by my own anxiety about understanding difference. I think, but cannot know, that Nila is aware of differences between us too. Certainly she offers explanations of traditions associated with her faith in the practised manner of someone who has engaged in cultural translations all her life. In this interview she says that hers is a love marriage, entered into in the face of some disapproval from her family of origin. Her family's disapproval means that the experience of becoming a mother is likely to have been different from that of other devout Muslim women and may have shaped what Nila felt able to talk about, especially in her in-laws' home.

I am aware of the temptation to offer a definitive explanation for Nila, to round off her story neatly, in keeping with the social science tradition of presenting 'findings'. However, tuning into my feelings of uncertainty and the shifts in my understanding over the fieldwork period help me hold onto the tentativeness and provisionality of what can be known.

The attention to my subjective feelings of constraint and the difficulty of making space, alerts us to the significance of the material context in which the interviews took place and how this shaped the emotional space for the interview. It also puts us in touch with the housing-related disadvantage faced by Bangladeshi families in Tower Hamlets, part of a larger social disadvantage (Salway et al., 2007). This helped to open out our understanding of situatedness in becoming mothers.

Recording the frustrations, anxieties and pettiness which occur in fieldwork in this way, although exposing, enables us to approach Butler's ethical position, by accepting the 'failures' of this encounter without needing to attach blame to the self or the other. The notes also reflect the pressure to produce a certain kind of account within a very particular scene of address, which underpins much social science research.

### **Sarah**

Our discussions of Nila and Sylvia have illustrated how a sensibility and method of working developed over time. The following discussion of Sarah shows how we worked in detail with an interview, in this case paying close attention to a moment of rupture. This extract, analysed in detail elsewhere (Elliott, 2011), is indicative of the flow of identifications and distancing in research relationships. It illustrates the intricate connections between my own experience and that of my interviewees.

Sarah is a white mother, in her early 30s, one of the few women in our sample to return to full-time work during the fieldwork period. I become aware of comparing how she manages working motherhood with how I do. Indeed I start the

fieldnote for our third and final interview by contrasting her boundaries with the blurriness of my own approach. Taking a work call on a non-working day, I am in a playground *hunched on the ground, struggling to hear her and manage diary, mobile and pen. I am noting how our positions were now reversed [..] we found a time easily. She wanted to be interviewed in her lunch hour and she asked me if I still remembered where her office was. She works from home and was talking about her house.*

After a bruising first few months, Sarah has settled smoothly back into work by the time of our final interview. Meticulously organised, she prepares everything her daughter might need for her day in advance and sticks strictly to her working hours: 'I work nine to five, those are my hours and I have a lunch hour and I don't give them any more time than that'. (Sarah, final interview). When I ask about how her daughter is at the childminder's, Sarah dwells on how they can say goodbye openly and easily. She mentions that her daughter had cried just once when she left and then goes on to talk about how she enjoys the other children. Following the project's methodological protocol, I draw her back to the crying.

Heather: Can you tell me about the time she did cry – did it stick in your memory at all?

Sarah: Truthfully no. Because (.) (faster) I thought she was crying, I didn't hear her too well, Joan puts the pushchair in, (faster)..and as soon as she goes in I-I-I leave (slower) I don't really tend to go in and look and wave and then (.)..(Heather: Right) I just literally, I say goodbye, and..I walk off, so I don't make a big deal out of it. I heard her cry as I walked away, but I thought oh maybe –,..if she's holding a toy and she drops it, she cries, because she really wants everything there...she cries when she drops things, and something like dropping a toy on the floor,..or she'll do it herself, she'll drop it herself and then she'll cry after it to remind you, pick it up for me please..(Heather: Yeah)

Sarah then goes on to say something that takes me by surprise.

Sarah: Sounds like a hard mum, doesn't it?

Heather: (Laughs) No, not at all, not at all, no

Sarah: It wasn't really obvious that she's crying because I actually left her

Heather: Right, yeah, I can see exactly what you mean, that's very interesting. And you mentioned your boss wasn't particularly – you didn't feel particularly that he was child friendly.

My laughter reflects my surprise and discomfort at being drawn out of role. I understand her question as a request for reassurance (which I offer) and then abruptly change the subject. I change the subject because I do not want to undermine her explanation and thus add to her anxiety. Although avoiding causing an interviewee anxiety is a widely accepted principle of ethical practice within qualitative research (Pidgeon et al., 2008) a more psycho-social approach would seek to 'stay with' such anxieties, to contain and explore them and thus make anxiety researchable (Hollway, 2008 p. 158; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, chapter 5). My reaction here therefore is an intuitive, rather than a considered professional one. Reflecting, I wonder if I have conveyed to her in my embodied response to her talk that I might have judged her a 'hard mum'. Would the question about the crying child have



been difficult for her if I had not been the person asking her? Does the question worry her, or just me?

When in supervision we discuss this extract in detail, I realise that her answer touches my own feelings about leaving my children with childcarers, moments that stick in my memory. When I notice this, when I make explicit the comparisons I am drawing between us – orderly shifts between paid work and mothering and a more haphazard approach – I am able to draw back from caricaturing Sarah as competent, compartmentalised and hard and see the ambivalences and accommodations in her account. Importantly, I am able also to think about this tendency to position mothers as other when they do things differently from me.

## Discussion

In our research project, writing fieldnotes was central to the reflexive production of knowledge, as was the further reflection involved in working with their contents. In some cases, the act of writing fieldnotes had a containing function, especially after intense or troubling interviews. They were also a way of accessing the assumptions the researcher was bringing to her analysis, a process of noticing and becoming aware of what otherwise might have been rendered insignificant.

The knowledge accessed through the use of researcher subjectivity raises further issues. These include the material circumstances of the researcher; her resources in finding ways to address and communicate her own subjectivity; the use of supervision in facilitating this; and the relevance of psychoanalytic methodology to reflexive research. The material and societal conditions of contract research have consequences not only for the researcher's well-being but also for data production and interpretation. This materiality has to be addressed as part of any reflexive work, whatever the methodology. The fieldnotes from 'Nila' express anxieties about performance, connected to uncertainties common to contract researchers in the UK, entering a new team with new methodologies. The short-term, casual conditions of contract research work, the frequent turnovers (Collinson, 2004), the competitive and individualistic research culture in UK universities (Mauthner & Edwards, 2010), the need for adaptability and then closure, all these impinge upon the researcher and shape her sense of professional identity. Mauthner and Doucet (2003) argue that greater career security enabled their reflective work, an acknowledgement of the potential vulnerability of the reflective contract researcher. The supervision space was somewhere where the researcher could disentangle her own experience and concerns from that of the interviewees and regain perspective on data which felt overly close, too disturbing, or which in their apparent ordinariness could be overlooked.

It cannot be anticipated how a researcher will feel drawn into a research relationship (Beedell, 2009; Goode, 2006). The demands of reflexive work include remaining open to the always unpredictable challenge of each encounter, and accepting the provisionality of such knowledge. With Sylvia, the reflexive work of supervision produced the understanding of how Heather's impulse to discount Sylvia from the research related to her shock and resistance to being the repository of some difficult feelings, that in turn stemmed from the 'unruffled' way in which Sylvia had imparted some disturbing information. This is one example of the emotional work of reflexivity.

Goode writes evocatively of the 'residue' of data that can attach to researchers leaving projects.

The researcher can become a repository for different kinds of data to those which s/he perhaps anticipated collecting. . . More often than not, they are 'held' by the researcher and carried away to the next project, or else reflected on in something of a vacuum. (Goode, 2006, p. 5.1)

Knowles' reflections on a particularly difficult field relationship and how this implicates what she terms her own 'emotional baggage' highlights the value of paying attention to what we would rather edit out. 'The feelings I saw as problematic and tried to repress in fact turned out to be a guide to deeper insight' (Knowles, 2006, p. 402), yet the use of the pejorative term 'baggage' suggests the painfulness of confronting such feelings and the difficulty in seeing complex emotions as a resource rather than a shortcoming.

As well as the implications for the well-being of researchers of holding unprocessed material, there are consequences for how research projects are written up. Hubbard et al. (2001) have noted the difficulty, within current academic frameworks, of conveying information apprehended through affective responses, information that can become a pale representation of the field. An advantage of the reflexive fieldnotes described above is that others have a record, which holds the immediate and embodied texture of fieldwork. Within the BaM project, other team members have been able to use fieldnotes, alongside ongoing contact with the researcher, to incorporate subjectively experienced data into writing from the project (Hollway, 2007, p. 335, 2009a, 2009b).

There were no models for the reflexive 'non-clinical' supervision sessions we created in this project, only those of academic supervision for research and clinical supervision for therapy. The supervision drew on distinctive psychoanalytic skills and principles of supervision (e.g. Berman, 2000; Ogden, 2005) but applied in a different context. The potential applications of psychoanalytic principles and practices in research settings have received considerable attention in the field of psychosocial research (see Layton, 2008). In particular, there has been discussion of whether the influence of psychoanalysis in research can lead to unwarranted psychoanalysing of subjects and wild analysis, claims to insights into the interior life of research subjects which are not grounded in the usual clinical context, with its ongoing possibilities of corroboration or disproof.

On the contrary, we found that the psychoanalytically informed supervision was a safeguard against wild analysis. The reflective and non-judgemental space that supervision provided meant that at times Heather's own concerns with herself as mother and worker could be acknowledged and then put to one side, at others that the complex intersubjectivity created by and in the interviews could be described, explored and analysed. Thus the interview subject could be seen more objectively, not predominantly through the lens of the researcher's feelings and responses. In other instances, these very feelings and responses were important clues to what may have been significant issues for the interviewees and allowed us to see her more richly, an example of using subjectivity objectively.

Thus the process did not involve considering interviewees as 'cases' to be interpreted psychoanalytically. Rather, paying attention to disruptions and shifts in interactional flows highlighted how fleeting understanding can be and kept analysis

open. Neither did supervision function as a form of confessional indulgence for the researcher, as some may fear. As in clinical supervision, emotions aroused by the work could be identified and discussed as to their significance but further personal exploration of these had to happen elsewhere. The implementation of this important boundary depends on the judgement of the supervisor and the ability of supervisee to contain emotions and conflicts that have been identified.

One principle of supervision within the project was confidentiality, a central constituent of psychoanalytic work. The frame of confidentiality provided a protected non-judgemental space with the safety to be honest enabling reflective work, all features of a psychoanalytic approach to supervision (Ogden, 2005). The detail of the supervision sessions was not discussed within the research team, although as the project developed, ideas from within supervision formed part of wider discussions. This creation of a confidential space, with boundaries held by the supervisor, is unusual for an academic environment. In fulfilling responsibilities to the supervisee and to the wider project, Jo had to do what therapists routinely do, to recognise and address the psychic realities of the person in the room, whilst acknowledging the uncertain status of any such accounts as regards the wider world. Thus the clinical skills involved in holding different forms of knowledge without wanting to collapse any of them into a 'real' account were useful here.

This illustrates a potential tension within reflexive research projects between the need to maintain professional relations and the openness and trust that needs to be established before personal feelings evoked by fieldwork can be shared with colleagues (Hubbard et al., 2001). This is particularly true with psycho-social research, which highlights the value of group data analysis in alerting researchers to aspects of fieldwork they are defended against hearing and their blind spots with regard to data (Froggett & Wengraf, 2004; Walkerdine et al., 2001). This approach also opens up questions of intellectual copyright, crediting of intellectual work within teams and different claims over interpretive validity, which are beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>4</sup>

The supervision also drew on psychoanalytically informed ways of noticing and listening to oneself, of not closing down, of staying engaged with feelings in relation to self and other, and simultaneously creating a space for associative thinking and reflection. Free associative thinking was part of the methodology of the project, and needs an enabling space, designated times and structure, as Mauthner and Doucet (2003) argue. Berman (2000) underlines how an intersubjective psychoanalytic orientation is conveyed as much by the nature of the supervision process as its content and this formed part of the educative aspects of supervision in reflexive thinking.

All the forms of reflexive work described here create a capacity for thinking in relation to the intensity, embodiedness and complexity of the face-to-face interview encounter. This project raises a question about the wider use of reflexivity. Whilst there will always be specifics attached to the backgrounds and experience of any researcher and supervisor, this paper demonstrates how the processes of accessing and using reflexivity can be communicated publicly.

## Notes

1. This article was made possible by funding from the Economic and Social Research Council, grant number 063-27-0118.

2. Wendy Hollway and Ann Phoenix 'Identities in process: Becoming Bangladeshi, African Caribbean and white mothers' (Grant RES 148-25-0058). Part of ESRC Identities and Social Action programme, with Heather Elliott, Yasmin Gunaratnam and Cathy Urwin. <http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/identities/findings/Hollway.pdf> A parallel method, psychoanalytically informed observation is not relevant here, but see Urwin, 2007.
3. We worked closely with the sister project, also at the Open University, led by Professor professor Rachel Thomson and Dr Mary Jane Kehily 'the Making of Modern Motherhoods'. The term 'reflexive (or reflective) fieldnotes' comes from there, a form of fieldnote 'in which researchers are encouraged to document the emotional dynamics of research encounters and their personal reactions to fieldwork situations' (Thomson, 2009, p. 3). For example, that team would note, after an interview, what came to mind in answer to the question 'what do I hope and fear for this person?'. We adopted this technique for noticing aspects of our emotional response to the interview.
4. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for drawing our attention to these issues.

### Notes on contributors

Heather Elliott is a freelance researcher and writer. Her current research interests include mothering (specifically mothers' relationships to paid work and 'motherwork') and qualitative methodologies to explore the unsayable. She has also published research on lay and professional knowledges and provision of care, on how research evidence is used within policy and on public health and inequalities.

Joanna Ryan PhD is a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, supervisor and researcher. She is a member of the Site for Contemporary Psychoanalysis and trained at the Philadelphia Association, London. She has recently been a Visiting Fellow at Goldsmith's College, London, conducting a research project on social class and psychoanalysis. She is co-author (with N. O'Connor) of *Wild Desires and Mistaken Identities: Lesbianism and Psychoanalysis* (reprinted Karnac, 2003), and author of *The Politics of Mental Handicap* (1987, Free Association Books), as well as many other publications.

Wendy Hollway is emeritus professor of psychology at the Open University. She has developed psycho-social research methodology during the course of various projects, drawing on psychoanalysis to furnish epistemological and methodological principles. She is currently writing a book provisionally entitled 'Knowing Mothers'.

### References

- Back, L. (2007). *The art of listening*. London: Berg.
- Beedell, P. (2009). 'Charting the clear waters and the murky depths'. In S. Clarke & P. Hoggett (Eds.), *Researching beneath the surface* (pp. 101–120). London: Karnac.
- Berman, E. (2000). 'Psychoanalytic supervision: The intersubjective development'. *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 81, 273–280.
- Butler, J. (2005). *Giving an account of oneself*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press.
- Clarke, S., & Hoggett, P. (Eds.). (2009). *Researching beneath the surface*. London: Karnac.
- Collinson, J. (2004). 'Occupational identity on the edge: Social science contract research in higher education'. *Sociology*, 38(2), 313–329.
- Elliott, H. (2011). 'Interviewing mothers: Reflections on closeness and reflexivity in research encounters', *Studies in the Maternal*, 3(1), <http://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk>.
- Froggett, L., & Wengraf, T. (2004). 'Interpreting interviews in the light of research team dynamics: A study of Nila's biographic interview'. *Critical Psychology*, 10, 94–122.
- Frosh, S. (2010). *Psychoanalysis outside the clinic: Interventions in psychosocial studies*. Palgrave: Macmillan.
- Goode, J. (2006). 'Research identities: Reflections of a contract researcher', *Sociological Research Online*, 11(2), <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/11/2/goode.html>
- Harding, S. (1991). *Whose Science, Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press.

- Henwood, K. (2008). 'Qualitative research, reflexivity and living with risk'. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 5(1), 45–55.
- Hollway, W. (2007). 'Afterword'. *Infant Observation*, 10(3), 331–336.
- Hollway, W. (2008). 'The importance of relational thinking in the practice of psycho-social research: Ontology, epistemology, methodology and ethics'. In S. Clarke, H. Hahn, & P. Hoggett (Eds.), *Object relations and social relations. Chapter 7* (pp. 137–162). London: Karnac.
- Hollway, W. (2009a). 'Applying the "experience-near" principle to research: Psychoanalytically informed methods'. *British Journal of Social Work Practice*, 23(4), 461–474.
- Hollway, W. (2009b). 'Conflict in the transition to becoming a mother'. *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, 15(2), 136–155.
- Hollway, W., & Jefferson, T. (2000). *Doing qualitative research differently: Free association, narrative and the interview method*. London: Sage.
- Hunt, J. (1989). *Psychoanalytic aspects of fieldwork*. London: Sage.
- Hubbard, G., Backett-Milburn, K., & Kemmer, D. (2001). 'Working with emotion: Issues for the researcher in fieldwork and teamwork'. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 4(2), 119–137.
- Jervis, S. (2009). The use of the self as a reflexive tool. In S. Clarke & P. Hoggett (Eds.), *Researching beneath the surface* (pp. 145–166). London: Karnac.
- Kleinman, S. (1991). 'Fieldworkers' feelings: What we feel, who we are, how we analyze'. In W. B. Shaffir & R.A. Stebbins (Eds.), *Experiencing fieldwork* (pp. 184–95). Newbury Park, SA: Sage.
- Knowles, C. (2006). 'Handling your baggage in the field: Reflections on research relationships'. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 9(5), 393–404.
- Layton, L. (Ed.). 2008. British psycho(-)social studies. Special issue of *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* 13(4).
- Mauthner, N., & Doucet, A. (2003). Reflexive accounts and accounts of reflexivity in qualitative data analysis. *Sociology*, 37(3), 413–431.
- Mauthner, N., & Edwards, J. (2010). 'Feminist research management in higher education in Britain: Possibilities and practices'. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 17(5), 481–502.
- Ogden, T. (2005). 'On psychoanalytic supervision'. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 86, 1265–1280.
- Pidgeon, N.F., Simmons, P., Sarre, S., Henwood, K., & Smith, N. (2008). 'The ethics of socio-cultural risk research'. *Health, Risk and Society*, 10(4), 321–329.
- Salway, S., Platt, L., Chowbery, P., Harriss, K., & Bayliss, E. (2007). *Long-term ill health, poverty and ethnicity*. London: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Thomson, R. (2009). 'Creating family case histories: Subjects, selves and family dynamics'. Retrieved from [http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk/assets/files/WP3\\_final\\_Jan%202010.pdf](http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk/assets/files/WP3_final_Jan%202010.pdf)
- Urwin, C. (2007). 'Doing infant observation differently? Researching the formation of mothering in an inner London borough'. *Infant Observation*, 10(3), 239–252.
- Walkerdine, V., Lucey, H., & Melody, J. (2001). *Growing up girl – psycho-social explorations of gender and class*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.