Qualitative sociological research methodologies and psychoanalytic thinking-congruence, 'discongruence' and lacunae.

Introduction and background

The research discussed here aimed to further understand the possible effects of being the subject of yearlong infant observations carried out as part of a psychotherapy training. It was conducted for a professional doctorate in psychoanalytic psychotherapy, undertaken by author 1, (a psychoanalytic psychotherapist), supervised by author 2 (an academic and quantitative researcher) and a child psychotherapist and qualitative researcher (noted in the acknowledgement).

In choosing the most appropriate qualitative methodology, Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss,1967) was considered, but did not seem to offer enough of the depth of meaning needed, given the intersubjective nature of the process being researched. Instead, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), was chosen, which explicitly embeds the researcher as part of the making of meaning from the data, rather than trying to show some kind of 'objectivity' through the use of audit processes. This fitted well with a psychoanalytic understanding and offered complimentary perspectives on the data. As will be discussed below, this was in good part successful.

However, both psychoanalysis and IPA have areas of 'absence' which we have termed lacunae. For psychoanalysis it was the question of robust evidence. The examination of countertransference as part of the data analysis could be criticised for only reflecting the researcher's opinions. For IPA, it

became a question of precisely <u>how</u> the researcher's involvement is understood as it affects the ways in which the themes and conclusions are determined and what conclusions are reached.

In IPA, the themes are extrapolated from the text and the words through the lens of the researcher. These are then subject to triangulation or audit. However, the assertions are, in the end, what sense the researcher makes of the topic and the subject. Even the introduction of some techniques from Conversation Analysis- and Psychoanalysis- could not offer a sufficiently robust evidence trail for the depth of conclusions the subject needed. This left the research team with two very rich and complementary methodologies but which did not provide sufficiently robust evidence. The criticism that a psychoanalytic methodology could not show sufficient 'objectivity', particularly in the use of countertransference, applies as much to IPA which relies at least in part on the researcher's ideas and feelings about the subject.

The research team attempted to overcome this lacuna by using one aspect of the IPA methodology which is to look for repeated words and groups of words to develop themes. The team also looked at the context in which the words appeared. The other methods used to expand the lenses through which the data could be interpreted were-

1] A micro-analysis of some of the speech patterns in the transcripts, drawing on some aspects of Conversation Analysis (CA). CA asserts that incidents of direct speech and the pattern of silences suggest areas of import.

2] Vivid descriptions- 'standout moments', that can offer some confirmation of findings. Direct speech and enacted or otherwise vivid scenes, are possible indicators of what is most important to the participant.

3] The examination of the congruences and differences between the participants about the shared experience. In looking at where the accounts of the same observation differed between the observed and their observer, as well as between the two groups of observed and observer participants, it was possible to note where something spoken about in one place was unsaid in another.

Psychoanalysis and IPA

The psychoanalytic approach has not traditionally featured greatly in qualitative research outside of the psychoanalytic world. As noted by Kvale (1999), "it remains a paradox of scientific psychology that although knowledge generated by the psychoanalytic interview has become a central part of psychology as well as our culture ... the psychoanalytic interview is rejected as a research method" (p. 96). The argument is that a therapist is trying to understand the unconscious and so claims knowledge, as the researcher, about which the patient / subject is unaware. Georgaca (2005) argues that psychoanalytic research is too theory-driven; Parker (1997) argues that it is too individual to be of wider relevance. However, Hinshelwood (2016) and Midgley (2006) assert that psychoanalytic understanding is congruent with qualitative research. Both require the researcher, or the clinician, to interpret what is said and felt, and make sense of the material with the patient/ subject.

Triangulation is crucial with IPA methodology to obtain the necessary depth of analysis. As described by Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez (2011), there are drawbacks to using IPA inexpertly. There is a risk of asking too many questions and offering superficial generalisations. The audit process and the

research team are needed to deepen the findings. There are many similarities between the IPA researcher's use of reflexivity and the psychoanalytic researcher's use of the countertransference, but IPA does not explicitly examine the "inchoate transference and countertransference" (Cartwright, 2004, p.218) which psychoanalysis would assert is always present. The IPA researcher looks at the repeated words and clusters to find meaning. Unless the IPA researcher takes into account other evidence from the texts, for example the patterns of speech and the emotional tone, he/she may only see a part of the whole. Important data comes from connecting thoughts and affect and entering into the emotional atmosphere of the lived experience but repeated words and/or proximity of concepts are not in themselves decisive evidence. The emotional atmosphere is taken seriously in IPA but also viewed with the suspicion that it may be the researcher's construction. IPA can include countertransference but suggests it may also prevent the researcher being open-minded. Thus, using IPA and psychoanalysis together as a research methodology leaves some unanswered questions.

Literature Search- IPA papers using psychoanalytic theory.

IPA has become a very popular method of qualitative research- Smith (2011a) found 293 papers in the years 1996 to 2008- but the authors found no papers which included IPA and psychoanalysis through cross referencing the usual databases. An individual micro search in reputable journals in the general psychoanalytic field produced 13 papers from 2003 to 2017, including one unpublished doctoral thesis. These were examined in detail. The papers described using strong feeling, repeated ideas across participants and

disagreements between participants as a means of determining meaning. All the papers used psychoanalytic theory to underpin both their aims and conclusions.

The ways these authors showed how they understood the making of meaning in the extrapolation of the themes, and how they reached conclusions about the existential import of the data largely falls into three areas: 1) commonality in all or most of the participants; 2) the use of audit and/or reference group; and 3) some form of researcher reflexivity. There was little detailed analysis of the actual transcripts in these papers except to offer excerpts which illustrate the identified themes. There were some references to repeated words or strongly expressed feelings, but overall, the way of making meaning was shown to be co-constructed. It included the researchers' emotional responses and feelings about what was important. What Smith (2011b) refers to as the single individual apposite comment which illuminates the themes, is based on the researcher's assumptions and experiences. These IPA and Psychoanalysis papers did not tackle the question of how the researcher's internal experiences are looked and or understood in reaching in their conclusions.

Areas of evidence

Following the findings from the papers, above, the data in this research was examined in the same three areas.

1)- Commonality

 Commonality in this research produced 2 main themes.

1) Lovely/ loved, and a calm space. All the observed used positive words on this theme and the words lovely and loved were used in each case at least 6 times. None of the participants referred to being given specific advice or having their way of parenting commented on, although they did talk about times when the observer spoke. The mothers described vivid scenes in which the observers had participated in something special in the minutiae of the baby's development. They all referred to the value of the observer being there wanting to hear everything about the baby and watching what was happening.

2) Being judged and being put at ease. There was a high number of references by the observed to being judged by other people, often professionals. However, judgements are not always negative. Some of the observed reported feeling judged positively and found this supportive. The observed found their observers valued the baby's development, and endorsed their mothering. However, the observed needed to be put at ease to be able to allow the observation to take place in a comfortable atmosphere and for all participants to benefit from it. This seemed to be helped by acquiring some personal information about the observer. The observed needed just enough information to make them comfortable. This was described well by an observed participant who said:

"O (the observer) *was lovely really; she came in with a really relaxed attitude although I … I am going to drop her in it here, I know she wasn't supposed to react or interact that much but she, she did a little bit, you know in just a normal everyday kind of thing and that was really helpful actually, that was really lovely.*"

All the observed valued the way that observer was neutral but very interested. One mother described:

"I think all you want to do is talk about your baby and I think you worry that other people get sick of hearing it, but O (the observer) *wanted to know."*

2) <u>The use of audit or reference group, and supporting literature</u>

Audit consists of showing transcripts to other researchers or experts to see if they find the extracted themes are consistent with the data. Some form of audit was used and/or referred to in these papers. However, an audit may not take account of the interviewer's reflexivity and it is questionable whether embedded researcher input and conclusions used in IPA can be subject to audit. It is hard to see how the conclusions can be either replicated by another researcher or verified by them. In this research, the transcripts were discussed in detail by the research team, and the findings with some experts in the field.

There is a lot written about infant observation, its conduct and its usefulness for training. However, an extensive literature search produced relatively little about the effect of being observed. Individual accounts suggested that the infant had an awareness of being observed and that the infant's carer found the process a helpful one.

3) <u>Reflexivity</u>

Both reflexivity and countertransference are essential parts of the qualitative researcher's experience. They are different aspects of the same realities. A psychoanalytic practitioner would see many similarities between

fully explored reflexivity and countertransference. It can alert the researcher to something with overly personal resonances which could interfere with the interpretation. It can also indicate concerns of the participant which are not being spoken about or fully discussed. Every qualitative researcher has to find a way of using reflexivity creatively. In the papers described above, reflexivity was used but not examined or described in much detail in most of the papers.

In this research the researcher used observations where she had been the seminar leader. This was partly to reduce the variables but largely to honour the process of in-depth research where the researcher's contribution to the findings could be examined. Participants were not pre-selected and the first volunteers whose observed families agreed were taken. This could have led to more 'successful' observations being included in the research so an interview schedule was constructed which specifically asked for anything which was difficult or had not gone well. Everyone had incidents to report. This process was monitored by being prepared to be surprised, and the researcher using her clinical sensitivity to look for unexpressed discomfort. Sometime this was only evident when the interviews were transcribed. The researcher also looked at the ways in which the communications from the participants evoked her feelings, and sometimes actions, which could indicate something of the participant's experience.

Example

This is an extract from one of the researcher's experiences doing a transcript analysis, which illustrates how countertransference was part of the

information used to develop a theme- in this case, the fear of being judged negatively.

"There are eight places where the observed told me some personal information about the observer or referred to her as a friend. I was rather startled at this; trainees are advised to keep personal information to a minimum and this is a particularly boundaried trainee. At first, I felt it was a judgement on my not having been a good seminar leader, which in part reflects the possibility of the parents fearing being judged as bad parents"

Thus, the examination of the data in line with the ways in which the IPA and psychoanalytic methodology papers had proceeded produced some conclusions. These were that it was a good and helpful experience, but that participants were anxious about being judged and needed to be put at ease in some way. This did not elucidate more about the reasons for these experiences and feelings. The team also felt that more breadth of evidence would add to the robustness of the findings. Accordingly, some further transcript analyses with different lenses were undertaken.

Further Areas of Evidence

1] Speech Patterns

The uses of direct speech (where the subject quotes something that was said to them) and the pattern of silences are important evidence. Conversation Analysis (ten Havre 2007) maintain they are areas of import. As noted by James, Pilnick, Hall and Collins (2015), the use of direct speech,

vivid and enacted scenes offer more validity of findings. In normal conversation we quote direct speech to emphasise importance. Patterns of silence in conversation can also be of import.

Uses of direct speech

Direct speech is of import particularly because it indicates that the interviewee is momentarily back in the situation and more powerfully communicating an important experience. This is described by many writers and researchers in the field (Clark and Gerrig 1990, Holt 1996, Clift 2006). But direct speech has to be understood in the context and tone of the conversation. Psychoanalysis would add the unconscious dynamics which would also be present. However, as Clark and Gerrig (1990) point out, a direct quotation is not necessarily a verbatim recollection of what was said. Human recall is not exact or infallible (Davidson, 1979) and the unconscious mind can select what is remembered. The memory depends on what the person recalling has made of the quoted conversation. Thus, quotations can be internally constructed as much as co-constructed. In this research, direct speech was generally part of a vivid description.

Silences

CA looks at silences during a participant's speech as part of what ten Have (2007) calls "the turn-taking machinery". The pattern of silences and turn-taking is observable in transcripts, but is open to different interpretations. Speaking face to face, the interviewee and the interviewer are giving each other myriad signals which are usually non-verbal and may not be conscious. All three methodologies, IPA, CA and psychoanalysis agree that these

moments are interactive and co-constructed. Identifying them can add to understanding what is important to the participant.

Thus, pauses indicate significant moments. They may be part of the speaker's internal process but have to be understood in context. These moment-by-moment events indicate that something has occurred which stopped the flow of the discourse. The examination of these moments can offer more evidence of what is of existential import in the data.

<u>Examples</u>

In four of the five observed participants, direct speech was common and formed part of a vivid description. This extract was accompanied by a lot of positive facial expression and a warm atmosphere. The mother said:

"She did give little bits away; she did say that the observers got a bit competitive about their babies. And she was laughing, saying 'has B got any teeth yet so I can tell the other observers? It's oh mine's got bottom teeth now, mine's crawling around…'"

Overall, there were very few long silences, and the quality of the pauses was reflective and comfortable. A typical pattern can be seen below. The observed would sometimes say quite a lot in answer to a previous question and then would leave a silence and look at the researcher expectantly. This extract (where the short pauses are indicated by an ellipsis) followed asking if the observed had any ideas of what the baby made of having an observer.

"I don't think he knew like exactly who she was, but he definitely was like a lot more friendly with her, as if he could sense who she was if you see what I

mean …….He felt comfortable around her. I mean ... my sister lives in X, so
we would go on holiday, like quite a few times, so every time when we came
back and he hadn't seen her he would still be excited to see her when she
came in, so he definitely, he could recognise her, so he knew this was
somebody who comes to the house and …"

Researcher   *"… who is interested in him."*

"Yeah, that's nice."

There was then a long (24 seconds) silence, which did not feel uncomfortable.

2] Congruences and 'discongruences'

IPA requires that the themes should be present in all, or most, of the
participants' data. The risk of this is that what is unsaid and/or may not be
able to be said is missed. It also risks missing any conflicting evidence or
deeming it to be unimportant. This can be overcome by Using dyads to
compare their accounts of the experience and looking for information where
there are differences. It is a common human need to find inner congruence
and agree with others. Quoted speech and phrasal breaks can denote the
need to find agreement between the speakers. In analysing transcripts, areas
of difference and discongruent opinions might be of import in the findings.
This includes thinking about what might have been omitted. The
psychoanalytic perspective suggests that omissions can be related to what is
unconscious, but also what is uncomfortable and has to be defended against.

Examples

Congruences

All participants said how valuable the experience had been for them and how much they had enjoyed it. Specifically, the marked congruences were: 1) In participants' accounts about their families and how they met, 2) In how they were sad at the ending. 3) In how watching the observer watching the baby was a very important experience.

'Discongruences'

In mostly very similar accounts of the individual observations from both participants, and across the groups of observers and observed, there were four areas in which there were differences between the observers and the observed. These were 1] The baby's reaction to the observer. 2] Curiosity about what the observer found. 3] Desire for ongoing contact. 4] Personal information. For example, in the matter of personal information, as noted above, the observed seemed need to hold on to something personal about their observer.

Discussion

For example, one striking lack of congruency is the mother's curiosity about what was happening to all the information gathered by the observer and her allied wish to continue to be in touch with the observer. The observer group as a whole did not appear aware that the mothers might have these feelings. These differences are worth examining. All the participants said the observation was a powerful experience. It is understandable that the trainee will want to move on after the observation ends. The observer is in a particular position, - being neither a friend, a family member, nor clinician. - and this does not easily translate into any other kind of relationship; the observer and

the observed both have to know something important is coming to an end when the observation time is over. This is the ongoing human work of development; something has to be lost in order for the next developmental stage to be achieved. This difference shows the two conflicting human desires - to grow and change, and to keep what is already there.

Using these differences to illuminate what may be important and largely unspoken, and/or which does not fit with the extrapolated overarching themes, also includes the intersubjective and reflective. The differences between the dyads seemed generally to be related to the relationship to the observer and their place in the family. There is evidence in the analysis of the areas of lack of congruence between participants and in the researcher's reflexivity to offer something which contributes to the existential import of the experience of being observed in this way. In the words of one observed participant, this theme would be about *"all his little milestones"*. The task of parenting involves both complete attachment and the ability to let go appropriately. This is difficult and challenging, evoking both joy and some regret. The joy is inherent in the ability to appreciate *"all his little milestones"*. This evidence indicates that one effect of being observed in this way is that this joy is supported by its being shared with the observer, whose special position is part of the process, and cannot be recreated when the process is finished. This inevitably leads to some sadness.

The loss involved in transition is both painful and necessary. Winnicott (1989) said "loss of the mother-figure is surely not pathogenic because of the process of mourning. This would leave out the whole concept of mourning as an achievement" (p. 430). This suggests that the mothers here were both sad

about the loss of the baby's earlier stage and pleased at the baby's development. It did not seem that the observed were distressed by the end of the observation, but there was a quality of sadness which seemed to parallel the bittersweet quality of the parent's experience of watching their baby's development with delight whilst at the same time knowing it is taking them away. The observer's apparent obliviousness to this where there was otherwise a high level of congruence would indicate that this is an area of difficulty.

Main Findings

1] Overall it was a a good and helpful experience for all participants.

2] The process of being observed supports the provision of a facilitating environment by helping the carer feel held and contained. It also supports the carer's and infant's healthy narcissism which is vital for development.

3] The observed participants have to have some confidence in their parenting abilities to agree to participate.

4] The observed will be anxious about being judged negatively; being put at ease mitigates this. They are likely therefore to ask for small amounts of personal information from their observer to help themselves feel comfortable enough to participate.

5] This research methodology requires IPA, Psychoanalysis and other insights and confirmations found through detailed examination of the minute and moment-by-moment speech patterns in the transcripts.

6] Projective identification occurs when here is a rupture in the experience or the process.

Conclusions

    One of the challenges of this research was to find a robust methodology which could allow the creative use of a psychoanalytic perspective. IPA was chosen because it allows the researcher to use their own experiences as part of the construction of the meaning. However, the IPA method of embedding the researcher's lived experience in order to extrapolate the themes and to understand the key issues, did not provide enough depth of meaning. What it offered gave two main themes- that it was a good experience and the observed had anxieties about being judged negatively and they needed something from the observer to mitigate this anxiety. Using the IPA methodology gave a clear evidence trail for these findings. However, it could be argued that these are unremarkable findings in the context of such infant observations, and what it does not illuminate is deeper meaning and existential import for the participants. Why it was a good experience, as opposed to a neutral one for example, and why there was an anxiety about being judged negatively, are not explored in this methodology.

    Psychoanalytic theory and the use of countertransference are able to offer possible explanations for both of these findings, and can deepen the understanding of the meaning of the experience. In particular, the theoretical exploration of the concept of healthy narcissism offers an understanding of why it might have been such a positive experience. The close examination of the countertransference experiences add weight to the theme of fearing being judged negatively, and why it is vital to have something which mitigates against this anxiety. The transcript analyses and the researcher's reflexivity

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and countertransference also illuminated a theoretical psychanalytic question about whether projective identification is universal. However, the psychoanalytic insights themselves had limited evidence in the transcript analyses done using the IPA methodology. Although they were coherent in psychoanalytic epistemology, it was difficult to show the precise evidence trail.

The strengths of both methodologies and epistemologies took this qualitative research a long way but left lacunae, and this is where the team looked for other sources of evidence. These included the pattern of silences in speech, the use of quoted speech and congruence and difference in the participants' accounts of the experience. These different sources of evidence both confirmed the IPA and psychoanalytic findings, and extended them. The six main findings coalesced through the process of using IPA and these other sources of evidence, all of which was also viewed through a psychoanalytic lens. This psychoanalytic lens gave words and concepts to what emerged from the evidence, as well as offering a deepening of understanding of what the experience had meant to the participants, and what sense they had been able to make of it. Arguably the psychoanalytic lens could have been omitted and the findings still have validity. This would be a loss of the possibility of a level of creative engagement with the research process and the existential import of what was discovered. At this level, the psychoanalytic perspective offers a narrative about <u>why</u> some things are so important, and thus enables the sense of the meaning of the experiences to come through. Lived experiences and emotions are more than events, they are part of the process of growth and change. The meaning of an experience or emotion is more than

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a descriptor of what happened, and more than a result of previous experiences and emotions, although it contains both of these. It is also the means whereby development can take place; meaning which is understood can be transformative.

Finally, the process in itself of wrestling with these methodical challenges can be said to in some way reflect the existential import of what qualitative research looks at; lived experience. It relates to the joys, problems and challenges of integration.

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