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Main Article:

Interaction, Transference, and Subjectivity: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Fieldwork

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Abstract

Fieldwork is one of the important methods in educational, social, and organisational research. In fieldwork, the researcher takes residence for a shorter or longer period amongst the subjects and settings to be studied. The aim of this is to study the culture of people: how people seem to make sense of their lives and which moral, professional, and ethical values seem to guide their behaviour and attitudes. In fieldwork, the researcher has to balance participation and observation in her attempts at representation. Consequently, the researcher's academic and life-historical subjectivity are important filters for fieldwork. In general, fieldwork can be understood as processes where field reports and field analysis are determined by how the researcher interacts with and experiences the field, the events and informants in it, and how she subsequently develops an ethnography. However, fieldwork is also subjected to psychodynamic processes. In this article, I draw upon a number of research inquiries to illustrate how psychodynamic processes influence research processes: data production, research questions and methodology, relations to informants, as well as interpretation and analysis. I further investigate through a case study how the psychoanalytical concepts of "transference" and "institutional transference" can provide insight into the dynamics of efficiency and democracy at a number of Danish human service organisations.

1. Interaction, Process and (Inter)Subjectivity in Social and Educational Research

In doing fieldwork the researcher takes residence in the field—both in a physical and psychological sense—and attempts to find a role that provides the least disturbing and unsettling position in the cultural setting of the field. The fieldworker becomes a part of everyday life: participating, observing, and reflecting. Important elements in the ethnographic methodology are fieldwork, the ethnographic interview, the field report, and the writing of an "ethnography" (Spradley, 1978). Originally, ethnography was developed as a methodology to explore everyday life and customs in foreign cultures and social organisations. But ethnography and ethnography-inspired methodology have gained ground where the researcher wishes to inquire into complex social and cultural phenomena in her own country. Thus, fieldwork has become an important approach in disciplines like organisational, educational, social, gender, and cultural studies. Any type of research is a creative craft, drawing on cognitive, emotional, and bodily processes. Various dimensions of the researcher's personality and professional-academic background are actively unfolded and could be seen as important building blocks and could be seen as shaping the research process. The research process may evoke a feeling of mastery when one seems to be able to develop an adequate analysis, identify the variety of human interactions and layers of meaning, and visualise the structure and key points of the analysis. At other times, the very same research work may be characterised by a feeling of powerlessness when one does not seem to have understood anything at all, when no key points may take form, or the data seem random, boring, or overwhelming. From a psychodynamic point of view these research and writing processes oscillate between emotions of omnipotence and powerlessness. The complex interaction between the field and the researcher is a familiar theme in the rich literature on fieldwork. The present article focuses directly on how psychodynamic processes influence research: data production, research questions, methods, relations to informants, as well as interpretation and analysis.

Fieldwork is well suited to the development of psychodynamic processes because it is based on long-term presence and human interaction. In this article, I examine how the psychoanalytical concepts of *transference* and *institutional transference* can provide insight into how people and organisations interact and perform. This kind of methodological and theoretical research adds diversity and depth to representations of social life and complements other forms of data collection. Research—and researchers in general—are influenced by both recognised and unrecognised motives and forces. The concept of transference provides insight into dimensions of the research process which may otherwise be difficult to access. The concept of *intersubjectivity* also adds an important theoretical dimension bringing in an understanding in which the other is not merely the object of the ego's need/drive or cognition/perception but has a separate and equivalent centre of self. The other must be recognised as another subject in order for the self to fully experience his or her subjectivity in the other's presence (Benjamin, 1995, p. 30). These approaches may thus help to dissolve traditional binary notions of subjects/objects and rational/irrational behaviours in organisations, and further enhance our understanding of how the internal and the external are interdependent (Britzman,

2011; Brock, 2011; Yiannis, 2002). This promotes analyses of individuals, organisations, social interactions, and learning paths which may go beyond rational, linear, empirical lines of evidence. By applying a psychodynamic approach, it is possible to create an inquiry that sheds light on the undercurrents of a learning culture, forms of government, organisations, persons, or groups (to a certain extent) and bring these dimensions into analysis, narrative, and representation (Andersen, 2005, 2012).

2. Psychoanalytically Informed Research Inquiries

The research literature presents a number of revealing examples of how psychoanalytically informed inquiries lead to in-depth representations; I shall introduce a few of those. The sociologist, Lillian Rubin researched how working class parents related to their children's schooling. During her fieldwork and data collection she gradually became aware of a reduced ability to "hear" what the parents told her. During many interviews and dialogues she perceived the parents as cautious in verbalising their uncertainty and uneasiness at the thought of their children becoming educated. This led to an intensive process of applying psychodynamic techniques in the research process, such as developing an *empathic sensitivity* through daily informal interaction that gradually enabled Rubin to develop rapport as well as applying the concept of ambivalence and considering both verbal and non-verbal data through an in-depth analysis. Thereby she was able to unfold and qualify the pain and fear that the working class parents felt about their children's education since they associated this with a subsequent social rise distancing them from their origin (Rubin, 1976, 1981).

The German social researcher, Ariane Schorn conducted fieldwork at Westend in Bremen, a high-profile cultural centre that aimed at providing cultural activities for workers who did not feel themselves as "consumers and performers of culture" (Schorn, 1994, p. 95). Through a series of theatre performances, cabarets, and musical productions, the local people had the opportunity to create cultural products. However, in her fieldwork she identified a mismatch between the people that actually joined the activities and the ideal group of participants. The employees of the centre experienced great difficulty in perceiving the problem, they lacked initiative and the centre found itself in a deadlock where nothing happened. In interviews, the staff expressed their uneasiness at the thought of having to meet new, unfamiliar participants and talked about the loss of the sense of security of not being among their own. The research group also noted how tired and exhausted they themselves felt when spending a whole day at the cultural centre. By applying a psychoanalytically informed interpretation, the phenomenon of "shame" appeared as a significant dimension. Both staff and users of the cultural centre experienced alienation, anxiety, and shame in connection with the activities of the workshop. The local workers were reluctant to use the workshop because of their anxiety of feeling alone and in a strange environment. They pointed to various explanations for why they did not take up the offer of the workshop: chaos in the workshop, their fear of being rejected, and how they had to change their clothes, their way of speaking, and themselves to fit in. Thus, the cultural centre was perceived as an identity-threatening venue representing another world with different norms and values, giving rise to perceptions of being judged negatively, and this seemed to threaten the

identity of the workers. At a deeper level, the unfamiliar threatening element could be interpreted as projections of drives and chaos (Schorn, 1994, p. 96).

The Danish social researcher, Linda Lundgaard Andersen carried out research in a sickness benefit office in a social services department and by applying psychoanalytical concepts she was able to pinpoint a crucial dilemma in social work. The social services department was caught in the crossfire between socio-cultural, economic, and political structures that affect management and staff in different ways. During her data collection and interaction with case officers, she was influenced by the harshness shown by the department managers in their view of the social workers, which positioned them as competent but very fragile and too "soft" to deal with clients' problems in the right manner. The case officers, on their part, were quite sceptical and ambivalent towards fulfilling their share of case management decisions, which they preferred to hand over to the middle manager. The starting point of the analysis was the function of the organisation as a projective object for fantasies, emotions, and reactions. A psycho-societal perspective clarified how the social services department transferred a crucial dilemma in social work onto case officers by processes of *individualisation*. The dilemma was related to the disparity between clients' complex life situations and the limited possibilities for case officers to resolve them. Andersen identified an ambiguity in this transference. In cases of failure, management sought explanations not by looking at possible organisational or societal restrictions or matters of social policy, but rather at the social workers' personal and professional life histories—they were subjected to a life historic individualisation and stigmatisation. Case officers, on the other hand, displayed ambivalence towards influencing case administrative work, which could be interpreted as an adequate defence mechanism. The displacement contained a double bind: the case officers' duty, on which they were assessed, was to solve their clients' problems, but at the same time, they did not have sufficient means to do so. When they failed, they were subjected to individual stigmatisation (Andersen, 2005).

3. Fieldwork and Psychodynamic Approaches

As we have seen in these accounts, researchers develop their fieldwork in a methodological and theoretical balance of experiencing, participating, and observing in their attempts to make representations. A classic distinction developed by Sterba suggests that the establishment of an ego-dissociation is a precondition of successful and productive positioning in the research field. In ego-dissociation, the researcher's ego is split into the "observing ego" and the "experiencing ego." The experiencing ego records and participates in the activities in the setting, while the observing ego considers and conceptualises the observations from a continuous meta-position (Friedman & Samberg, 1994; Sterba, 1934). Researchers must be both observing and experiencing; neither of these processes should predominate, since both dimensions are significant for the research process. The previous research examples shed light on this phenomenon. At some point, several of the researchers in question noted somewhat of a conflict between the observing and the experiencing aspects of their scholarly work. They all found themselves grappling with a disturbance in mind caused by the incidents and people interacting in their research settings and their failure in trying to understand and make

sense of this disturbance. Through introspection, that is, inspecting their own emotions, reflections, and observations, the researchers succeeded in deepening their understanding by applying various psychoanalytically informed concepts and methods.

Harriet W. Meek points out that unconscious mental processing is an integral and often unrecognised aspect of creative work, which is especially important for qualitative research. It is not the data alone which hold the findings, but also the processing in the researcher's mind. The researcher's mental processing might be explored by applying psychoanalytically informed notions that relate to unconscious processes. This will alert researchers to elements of their mental work of they are only partially aware (Meek, 2003).

Departing from the ethnographic tradition, Jennifer Hunt describes the psychoanalytical project as an expansion and refinement of the traditional sociological approach to fieldwork, focusing on exploring a set of relationships between the researcher and the field which are often marginalised (Hunt, 1989, p. 11). Research and interpersonal relationships are mediated through unconscious psychological processes as well as conscious sociological processes (Hunt, 1989, p. 17). Traditionally, sociologists have limited the symbolic value of meaning to cultural phenomena such as norms and values and focused their data collection on interactional, political, and economic spheres of life. Some sociologists have collected data about people's emotional lives in order to explain the relationship between emotions, interaction, and action. In contrast to this, psychoanalytically inspired anthropologists have defined their studies more broadly: they have collected data about people's dreams, fantasies, and slips of the tongue to explore the unconscious dimensions of the phenomena under investigation. The combination of psychoanalytical and sociological frames of analysis is not a contradiction, rather an expansion in order to create an analytical framework where they are complementary and mutually enriching (Hunt, 1989, p. 10). Other researchers point out that the disciplinary split between sociology and psychology hinders the study of interweaving between individuals and social relations and therefore calls for the development of transdisciplinary research (Day Sclater, Yates, Price, & Jones, 2008). Likewise the current trend for evidence and documentation of the effectiveness of welfare services through target-driven practice and monitoring reduces the ability to speak of—and to research—practice-based knowledge, professional doubt, and unsuccessful work processes (Andersen & Dybbroe, 2011, p. 264). In other words, social research needs to develop and apply a methodology that is able to create representations that are multi-dimensional.

It is possible to identify three significant aspects in a psychoanalytically informed methodology. First, the researcher's self is considered to be a significant scientific tool, contrary to other forms of epistemology. Any data format, be it interview, observation, photograph, or video, passes through the field researcher's hands: through her cognitive and mental processing and the relations developed in the field. Second, fieldwork is much more action research than armchair research. This implies interaction, participation, and observation of how people live their lives. Third, fieldwork implies a learning process for the researcher or a *secondary socialisation*, since researchers must acquaint themselves

with the research subjects' lives, culture, discourse, and language and must therefore learn to adapt culturally (Hunt, 1989, p. 14).

The French psychoanalyst and ethnologist, George Devereux has also contributed an epistemology centred on transference and countertransference. Data produced in behavioural science affects the researcher in different ways and for this reason Freud's concepts of transference and countertransference are well placed as an element of investigative methodology. Research into human behaviour and interaction may produce anxiety and insecurity, against which the researcher protects herself in various ways. Devereux points out that it is not the study of the subject, but rather the observer, that provides access to the essence of the observational situation. Scientific studies of people and their interactions must therefore be unfolded in three dimensions: how the subject behaves, what "disturbances" are created by the observer's existence, and the activities and behaviour of the observer (e.g. her anxiety, defence manoeuvres, research strategies, decisions, and attempts to give meaning to her observations) (Devereux, 1967, p. xix).

4. (Institutional) Transference and Countertransference

The psychoanalytical concepts of transference and countertransference are central in psychoanalytic treatment, but as mentioned above are also frequently applied in anthropological, sociological, and psychological research. In the context of psychoanalysis, the phenomenon of transference originally referred to a transfer or shift of past emotional ties (to, for example, a mother or father figure) to the person of the analyst. Freud uses the concept of cliché to refer to the fact that every human being, through the interaction between innate abilities and childhood influences, has acquired a unique way in which he pursues his love life, the demands he makes on it, the drives he thus satisfies, and the goals he sets for himself. These clichés are repeated and reprinted throughout life but are not insusceptible to fresh impressions (Freud, 1992/1912, p. 103). In our everyday life, transferences occur frequently, where emotions, attitudes, fantasies, anxieties, and expectations related to childhood objects are transferred to current objects in our lives (Freud, A., 1966/1936). These are processes which are generally not known or recognised. Countertransference is closely related to transference with a similar dynamics, but from the analyst to the analysed subject. Here the process denotes unconscious feelings, fantasies, and attitudes that the analyst may have about the analysed subject and the analytical process.

In the context of research analysis—which differs basically from a treatment setting—the non-conscious can be observed through various forms of expression and thus be made the subject of interpretation and analysis. These forms of expression may be psychoanalytic processes such as *condensations*, where multiple thoughts can be combined into one mental image, *displacements*, where an emotion can transfer from one object/phenomenon to another, *transferences* as previously mentioned, and *ambivalence*, where an object or phenomenon arouses conflicting emotions, for example, both negative and positive (Freud, A., 1966/1936). Unconscious actions are intentional and goal-oriented, although the objective may not be clear. Understanding an unconscious action therefore does not involve uncovering the unconscious forces "behind" the action, but

interpreting the non-conscious or pre-conscious meaning in order to represent social reality in a more multifaceted manner. Britzman points out how Freud positioned objections, objects, and obstacles to constitute psychoanalytic movement and thereby suggests that it is as if Freud is always addressing a learning subject from the point of view of learning from difficulties. In this way, individuals engaged in psychoanalyses place their objections to the process of psychoanalysis and in doing so they transform this resistance or anxiety into psychoanalytic objects such as ego defences, resistance to resistance, moral anxiety, transference and love, free association, and dreams. Britzman names these phenomena "sticky constructions" (Britzman, 2011, p. 20).

The German organisational researcher, Franz Wellendorf has further clarified these concepts by his use of the term "institutional transference and countertransference." *Institutional transference* refers to what the specific organisation or research field and its members transfer to the researcher and *institutional countertransference* is what the researcher produces in relation to a specific organisation or field and its members. The researcher's emphasis will thus be coloured by her personal life history and experiences related to organisations which will have influenced her observations and behaviour during the research process, albeit unconsciously and rather unnoticed (Tietel, 1994, p. 47; Wellendorf, 1986, p. 58). The transference processes are therefore targeted in their focus and significance towards a particular research relationship and the mutual interaction between the researcher and a certain field. Erhard Tietel mentions the example of research in school settings: How can researchers study the school as an institution without including the fact that the researcher herself has feelings and experiences connected to this institution, both from the time she sat at her desk as a pupil and also perhaps in relation to her own school children (Tietel, 1994, p. 48)? If the researcher had successful schooldays with satisfactory academic and social experiences, or difficulties and conflicts in her interaction with teachers, how will this colour the researcher's countertransferences to the field and affect the researcher's interaction and perceptions of the field's institutional transference?

The concept of institutional transference is pertinent for an understanding of the specific dynamics and positioning established between the researcher and the field or organisation researched—because Wellendorf focuses the significance and predictive power of the transference on precisely this interaction. Any institution will influence the researcher and try to draw her into the dynamics of institutional life and incorporate her in its structures in order to eliminate her as a disturbing foreign body. These reactions from the field to the researcher's presence and actions are therefore of great importance for the analysis of the field and organisation. The medium which appears suitable for an analysis of an organisation's institutional structure and dynamics but which, it should be noted, is not directly available either cognitively or emotionally, is the researcher's relation to the organisation (Wellendorf, 1986). In fieldwork, the researcher will both take up and be assigned roles that will contain elements of *regression* (return to previous infantile reaction patterns) and transference. In those cases where these roles replay or recall conscious and unconscious conflicts from the researcher's own past, the transference will be much more active and significant for the research work (Hunt, 1989, p. 37).

5. A Research Case Study

In the following case example, I illustrate how a 4-year research project gradually developed various processes of transferences between the researcher and the research field. I outline the points of analysis which may ensue from such transference and localise these in a larger context of data and scholarly work. The research project aimed at studying how a 3-year experiment in "site-based management" and stakeholder participation in human service institutions evolved. The study focused on barriers, potentials, and results based on fieldwork, interviews, observations of managerial meetings, and a semi-structured questionnaire (Andersen, 2003). I experienced how turbulent and contentious research on site-based management, democracy, and participation could be at my first meeting with union representatives and employees in human service institutions. I presented my research outline stressing my intention to develop a cooperative and participatory research design involving the staff members in the human service institutions and how I imagined that my research would be able to facilitate organisational change and self-management. But almost before I had finished they reacted strongly to this declaration: they cast doubts about my motives, referring to quite disturbing experiences with private consultants who had disappointed them, and said they were utterly fed up with constant efforts which had no spill-over effect on their everyday work as well as politicians who did not keep their word. All they wanted was sufficient resources to get on with their work and be left in peace. Some of those present were however more positive and expressed interest in participating. When I left the meeting, I felt shaken up and somewhat uncomfortable. I felt a bit of a failure, rejected, confused, and frustrated by the fact that a host of factors and experiences that had nothing to do with me exerted such a powerful influence.

As the participants at the meeting had no prior knowledge of me as a researcher, these reactions had to be rooted in various other experiences. The psychoanalytic concept of *displacement* where an emotion can shift from one object/phenomenon to another may shed light on what was happening (Freud, A., 1966/1936). The people at the meeting displaced their experiences and feelings from their long-standing and somewhat frustrating experiences of management, politicians, and consultants to my research project and my person. Displacement takes place in transference when there is a common element between the original and the current situation, which thus creates a channel for the transference. In this case, my presentation contained words which coincided with a number of key words from the dominant political rhetoric about self-management and client/employee democracy, evidential discourse, quality development, and resource cuts, which were all too familiar to them from their work situation. In recent years, their work situation had been full of ambivalent experiences, broken promises from the human service administration and politicians, unsatisfied clients for whom the staff were unable to provide enough quality care, cutbacks, and a constant flow of new professional demands and challenges. Consequently, they had a reservoir of experiences and emotions related to these issues ready to be activated in a suitable setting.

Similarly, my subsequent fieldwork and further data pointed to the existence of a culture of hostility in the cooperative efforts between institutions and management. Meetings

with management and in the institutions all established the same reference frame for how they perceived my role as researcher. There was apparently no possibility of a neutral position. With the image of hostility dominating communication and relationships, it is difficult to accommodate the presence of a researcher who may wish to occupy an alternative position. In line with the logic of the field and the institutional transference, the researcher was perceived as biased or as someone who should be either won over or rejected. These various institutional transferences were also very active in the form of general organisational and individual response patterns. Generally the mood was marked by insecurity and malaise. At the same time, management pressure for change towards strengthening the consultancy and advisory aspect, structural changes in the organisation with new fields of expertise and greater internal competition, as well as new and demanding in-service training due to changing competence requirements were additional factors which led to heightened anxiety and insecurity.

This meant that issues of self-management and participation released a stream of impassioned statements in either a negative or positive direction. My initial reactions and feelings of inferiority, anxiety, anger, and rejection were, I later learned, also typical of many of the staff in the institutions. Thus the employees in the meeting managed to set up an institutional transference situation where they transferred the same range of emotions to me that they had been carrying themselves for some time—and I gave a suitable response by receiving and feeling the very same emotions. My countertransferences as a researcher contained not only dejection for not having received confirmation and recognition as a scientist, but also anger and irritation at their criticism and lack of control over the situation. I have to presume that these experiences and circumstances have been a significant driving force in my subsequent research publications where I have produced several analyses of various modernisation scenarios—seemingly driven by the wish for recognition and the desire to decode the lack of control over the situation.

Later in the research process, a number of more positive identifications did develop. Two human service managers from a shelter for battered women and a shelter for homeless men approached me and asked for my assistance in planning and facilitating a workshop on site-based management and member participation from clients and staff. The managers wanted to implement this organisational model but also acknowledged the many difficulties in reorganising and bringing changes to clients and staff, which aroused considerable criticism and scepticism. In another case, two managers from a mental health residential home and a home for mentally disabled adults approached me and invited me to perform an evaluation of a 1-year experiment in which disability pensions were paid directly to the residents of these two human service institutions instead of being administered by the staff members (Andersen 1996). My research task was to document the results and changes caused by the payment of the pensions to the residents themselves and to examine the resulting interaction between the staff and the residents. Finally at the end of the evaluation process, before publishing the final report, a validation by members was performed and several managers and staff members expressed great satisfaction upon the fact that the report had produced a nuanced representation in which the human service institutions felt acknowledged.

By examining and interpreting the researcher's thoughts, reactions, and emotions through these institutional transferences, I was able to develop a psychoanalytically informed research practice based on these empirical experiences in the field. I validated these early findings over a 4-year period of empirical studies consisting of a semi-structured questionnaire for 30 social and health care institutions, qualitative interviews with 35 employees, clients, and management representatives, and fieldwork in four social and health care institutions on client and employee democracy. I also observed administration and management meetings in human service institutions for 1.5 years. On this basis, I concluded that development and change processes related to administrative and professional modernisation created anxiety and unrest, defensiveness and ambivalence among employees and management. The management response to the anxiety and defence mechanisms of the staff and institutions often involved rational, instrumental initiatives, such as a 1-day seminar packed with one-way teaching about best practice or written instructions about what the institutions were and were not allowed to do. These initiatives failed to improve the situation—rather the contrary. Instead, management and institutions could have profited by establishing a more reflective and less confrontational work climate with greater emphasis on dialogue, participation, and gradual changes. Analysis of transference between the researcher and the field was thus able to provide insight into organisational and human dynamics and could therefore moderate the prevailing understanding of change and modernisation. Human service employees were generally viewed at that time as reactionary, negative grumblers—and this perception afforded little space for insights into how economic frameworks, participation, and forms of communication radically affect development and change. Finally, the analysis showed that the economic, political, and cultural context also had great significance for the intensity and extent of defence mechanisms (Andersen, 2003). The Danish discourse of modernising welfare state organisations places practice-based development as the driving force in the achievement of a number of economic, democratic, and professional objectives. These government-driven objectives tend to establish an ambivalent cocktail in which the everyday work of many professionals presents tensions and contradictions. Although processes involving efficiency and evidence are predominantly understood as expanding in a rational arena, my research has demonstrated that by using a psychoanalytic perspective it is possible to dismantle this notion by pointing to the complexity that such processes often present. Development and change towards more efficiency and practice-based democracy are likely to cause anxiety, defensiveness, and ambivalence. An analysis of transference provides significant insight into organisational and human dynamics, thereby refining our understanding of public organisational development. This is in part fuelled by the setting of public administration, which typically responds to anxiety and defence mechanisms with rational and instrumental measures rather than the establishment of a reflective, defence-reducing work environment. But also the economic, political, and cultural contexts influence the intensity and extent of defence mechanisms (Andersen, 2003).

6. Conclusion

The perspective in this article has been to unfold how fieldwork in human and social research is influenced by various conscious and unconscious processes. The concepts of

transference and institutional transference have been used to shed light on the latent knowledge always present in fieldwork. Scholars using fieldwork in educational, social and organisational research taking place in schools, adult education institutions, workplaces, human service organisations, and so forth, often find themselves involved in difficult, conflicting, and complicated interactions and processes. They are embedded in significant experiences and interactions that will influence their research. In many cases their reactions and incidents may be seen as individual and private emotional factors to be dealt with in the private sphere and consequently dismissed as irrelevant for research inquiry and analysis. Contrary to this point of view, I have demonstrated the importance of these processes and the knowledge reservoir to be revealed if they become more visible and reflected upon as illuminating paths of inquiry—in order to create a deeper and more nuanced narrative.

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