The Researcher’s Subjectivity as a Research Instrument

From intuition to surrender
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Aims

• To introduce different frameworks by which to approach an understanding of the role of subjective experience in research and practice
• To link these frameworks so as to develop a sense of how the relation of researcher and research may be developed according to these models
Reflexivity, attention and intuition

• Much has been made of the value of reflexivity in research in recent times
• How can we understand what may be meant by it, what its uses and principles for research and practice might be?
• Starting with Steiner, Bergson, Bion and moving through to a relational perspective.
Steiner -Knowledge of the Higher Worlds and How to Attain It

• The student must not blunt himself to the outer world, but while lending himself to its impressions, he should be directed by his rich inner life.

• It must not be thought that much progress can be made if the senses are blunted to the world. First look at the things as keenly and as intently as you possibly can; then only let the feeling which expands to life, and the thought which arises in the soul, envelop you. The attention should be directed on both phenomena. Then, in due time, new and different thoughts and feelings will emerge ...

• LOOK OUT on the world with keen, healthy senses, and quickened power of observation, and not try to make out, through intellectual speculation, what the things mean, but rather allow the things themselves to tell you.
Steiner’s spiritual philosophy and continental philosophy

• Spiritual science: a contradiction in terms or something that might be spoken of in different, less direct, terms by others?
• Virtuality may be a term that partakes of the spiritual, but is framed within a more mainstream philosophical framework
• Bergson and some postmodern philosophy are in my view approaching and demystifying the same levels of reality
The virtual- Bergson, Deleuze and Guattari

• It is a realm of forces in tension generative of actual manifestation in the physical and psychical world
• It is real but not actual, it stands as it were behind our conscious life and is constitutive of it
• It is not limited in the way actual physical reality is; we can name aspects of it and so enter a paradox: by naming we restrict and actualise what is incommensurable by nature
Duration an allied concept to the virtual

- Time’s dual nature: quantifiable clock time and a realm where time is ever present
- In a sense this can be seen as another way of thinking about the unconscious
- When we bring something powerfully enough to mind we are transported back to the experience
- Our own history, what has made us who we are is always with us in its entirety, even if we are only able to grasp a fraction of it consciously
Bergson’s intuition as a method

• “The mind does not know itself truly and does not grasp itself except in its effort to discover a precise solution to a particular problem” (Lacroix, 1943, p.197 quoted in Barden, 1999, p.33)

• An ontology of process, based on previous concepts and a distinction between static and dynamic processes as different in kind, as quantitative and qualitative aspects

• Clearly Steiner’s framework and those outlined have in common attention to and emphasis on qualitative aspects and self-knowledge, which is based on disciplined subjective experience
The rules of intuition as a method

1. Attention to the positing of questions
2. Framing of problems in terms of time, rather than space
3. Attention to differences in kind between qualitative and quantitative aspects of reality

Now on to another psychoanalytic version of how to learn to help understand third rule
Bion a psychoanalytic mystic

- Bion is known for having borrowed from Keats the idea of negative capability
- ‘Without memory and desire’ is the attitude the therapist and the learner should adopt
- This means without assumptions and prejudice or the wish to prove something
- Bion made a distinction between knowledge and learning.
Bion’s K and O

• He used the symbol ‘K’ to denote ‘knowing’ and ‘O’ to denote ‘not-knowing’. ‘O’ stands for the reality of the moment, its truth, which is immanent (French and Simpson, 2000, p.55) and ultimately ungraspable in an absolute sense.

• ‘O does not fall in the domain of knowledge or learning save incidentally; it can be “become”, but it cannot be “known”’ (Bion 1970, p.26, also in French and Simpson, p.55)

• Positing a tension between ‘K’ and ‘O’, he locates learning as the process of withstanding that tension and its discomfort. ‘Learning arises from working at the edges between knowing and not-knowing.’ (French and Simpson, 2000, p.54).
A summary of some basic building blocks so far

• The ontological duality outlined by Bergson is important as it opposes a split between mind and body. It is an embodied view which puts affective and qualitative dimensions at the centre of inquiry, while acknowledging their tensions in co-existence with more finite quantitative aspects of life.

• Bion’s distinction between K and O can be understood in similar terms

• This duality can be approached from a neuro-scientific perspective in terms of left and right brain processes (see Allan Schore). Making the distinction between analytical thinking and attunement is also fundamental to Jessica Benjamin’s relational perspective
Subjectivity in research so far

• What Steiner’s, Bergson’s, Bion’s or neuro-scientific notions have in common is the acknowledgement of aspects of reality, which require special conditions in order to be related to and researched. The researcher’s subjectivity and introspectively derived material is vital to this.

• In general the special conditions have to do with a particular attitude the researcher has to be willing and able to adopt. I will enter into this more fully at the hand of Jessica Benjamin’s notions of thirdness, itself similar to and founded on Winnicott’s notion of transitional space, and her ideas on one, third and surrender.

• Suffice to say for now, that all the perspectives outlined make it imperative to inquire into ‘beneath the surface’ aspects of reality.
Transitional space

- Transitional or potential space is described by Winnicott (1971: 98-101) as an intermediate space between the individual and the environment and between inner and outer reality, where there is infinite variability of phenomena. This space is in his view where both creative play and cultural experience are located and is a place of maximally intense experience of a non-orgiastic kind.
Intersubjectivity

Benjamin (2004, p. 1) defines ‘intersubjectivity in terms of a relationship of mutual recognition—a relation in which each person experiences the other as a “like subject”, another mind who can be “felt with”, yet has a distinct, separate center of feeling and perception.’
Twoness and Thirdness

• *Twoness* or complementarity is characterised by power struggles and doer/done to, polarised, split consciousness (static)

• *Thirdness* is a quality or experience of intersubjective relatedness that has as its correlate a certain kind of internal mental space; it is closely related to Winnicott’s idea of potential or transitional space. (Benjamin 2004, p.7) Not a thing! (dynamic) The space/experience is shared and co-operative
One in the Third and Third in the One

- *One in the third* is the part of the third that is constituted by oneness, i.e. affective resonance, attunement, oneness of mother and baby in non-verbal rhythmicity or musicality.
- A different kind of lawfulness arises.
- *Third in the one* has to do with the ability to hold the tension of difference in relation. It helps create the symbolic space of *thirdness*. 
Moral third and surrender

• A deep identificatory one (empathy) in the third is prerequisite for developing positive aspects of observing third, otherwise asymmetrical relation and idealisation turns to submission or resistance and observation, judgement

• The moral third accepts asymmetry, accommodates, with the intention to connect to the other, which brings about reflections and self observation (our students are our teachers)

• This acceptance of difference and differentials, of both the power to hurt and to make mistakes, as well as heal, allows for surrender, a conscious responsible accommodation, which is not submission
How does this all relate to research practice

• Benjamin’s account gives us a more complex set of interconnected elements as necessary for relational practice. I would say this is the proper model for true participant observation, where participation = attunement, action research and good practice.

• Where elements are missing the commonly known problems of going native, excessive empathy, or observation becoming judgement may come about.

• Using empathy, reflection and imagination, withstanding the tension between K and O are key to an encounter with difference that might bear fruit.

• The possibility is deep learning about oneself and about the other.
Relationality=Inter-est=it is between

- Reflexivity is the attention of the mind to itself, but that comes about only in relation to engagement with a third aspect, another or an element of observation.
- Interest makes observation keener and attunement stronger. Recognition is then possible in a way that is based on the space between and tension between K and O, able to apprehend both quantitative and qualitative aspects of reality in their ever-mingled actuality of lived life.
- Researcher and researched both partake of these aspects and create together new located understanding.
- Neuroscience has gone a long way in identifying affective elements of interaction as embodied. Mirror neurones give us the possibility of mirroring not only actions, but the intentions behind them.
- The trick is to pay notice to them.
Bibliography

• Benjamin J. (2004) ‘Beyond Doer and Done to: an Intersubjective View of Thirdness’ in Psychoanalytic Quarterly, LXXIII, pp. 5-46
• Deleuze G. (1991), Bergsonism, Zone Books, New York