Response to Bob Hinshelwood, Psychoanalytic Research, Personal Reflections

Abstract: This response welcomes Hinshelwood's plea for research in the psychoanalytic setting, and his discussion of processes for clarifying concepts and comparative examination of different positions. I suggest that the aims of Hinshelwood's project could be more effectively realised within a social science approach and discuss some implications for ways of conceptualising science, theory and subjectivity. I suggest that the focus for research within the psychoanalytic setting should include how clinical practice is evolving under changing social contexts.

Keywords: theory, subjectivity, practice, reflexivity, social science, *techn*e, context dependent

Conflicted, competitive and divisive contexts, in both adult and child and adolescent services, provide continuing challenges to psychoanalytic practice and its capacity to survive. How can practice be supported? A united front would help, but as Bob Hinshelwood shows, this is not a characteristic of psychoanalysis. How to understand the pluralist nature of psychoanalytic theory and practice, and how to counteract the tendency towards fragmentation need to be thought about. Bob Hinshelwood's work is monumental in developing clarity and focusing on re-evaluating the basis of psychoanalytic knowledge. The call for 'research on the couch' highlights the central importance of researching clinical processes to develop knowledge, through systematic methods, and using this as a basis for communication and discussion within and outside the psychoanalytic community. This agenda is stimulating and important. From my perspective, from a social sciences background, I wish to suggest a different approach which, however, leads to some similar conclusions about the importance of examining and re-evaluating positions and affiliations and clarifying concepts and mechanisms. So I will briefly explore key recent debates concerning theory and subjectivity to consider how research can address current practice needs.

Theory

Physics has a powerful lure; knowledge, in natural sciences, based on causal explanation and prediction, tends to be cumulative and unifying, developing within paradigms (Kuhn 1962). Diverse theoretical positions and conflicts do exist but there is an established method for resolving disputes experimentally. Natural science accordingly has considerable power and prestige in society. Human sciences, including psychoanalysis, have been understandably drawn towards emulation of the natural sciences; "I always envy the physicists and mathematicians who can stand on firm ground", said Freud, "I hover so to

speak in the air"[1]. Freud's aspiration for the scientific status of psychoanalysis sits alongside his reflection that his case studies "read like novellas, and that they, so to speak, lack the serious stamp of science"[2]. However, he added – importantly - that it is "the nature of the subject, rather than my predilection, that is responsible for the result". Freud thus established a model for generating psychoanalytic knowledge, working iteratively and bi-directionally between clinical material – including self-observation and reflection - and theory. In current clinical work - and infant observation – detailed accounts of clinical material include behaviour and context produce 'thick description' (Geertz 1973). Alternative interpretations are available for scrutiny; Hinshelwood's (2008) discussion of repression and splitting provides a clear example. The method maps on to some kinds of social science research, as illustrated by Spillius, writing about her introduction to Klein's work:

> "… each of the early clinical papers seemed to me like a good anthropological monograph …… There were vivid data, just enough theory to make sense of the data, sudden jumps of imagination and theoretical understanding that led on to the next paper" (Bott Spillius 1994, p 324).

As argued by *inter alia,* Braddock[3], (2007) and Rustin (1997, 2007) psychoanalysis has characteristics of, and makes contributions to, social sciences. Whilst taking this as a model for scientific work implies relinquishing, to an extent, the aspiration for the natural science ideal of a unified and context independent kind of knowledge, it brings advantages and a certain degree of freedom, or room to manoeuvre whilst not compromising rigour. The choice of method depends on the problem being studied and its contexts; what matters is the careful selection of research questions, and matching these with suitable methods. Some methods are suitable for testing hypotheses and applying Popperian standards of falsification, whilst others are more exploratory and hypothesis generating. As Hinshelwood asserts, hypotheses can be tested in qualitative research, including single case studies. Other kinds of knowledge are also valuable; for applied or practical sciences the Aristotelian notion of *techne*[4], indicates know-how or craft, or "craft-knowledge" (Rustin 2007) which is more context-dependent and descries "a practical rationality governed by a conscious goal" (Foucault 1984)[5]. *Techne* describes the combination of self-understanding, training and

[1] The quote is from Jones (1955), here cited from Flyvebjerg (2001, p27).
[2] The quote is cited from Gay (1988 p.89)
[3] By locating psychoanalysis within psychology as a social science Braddock makes the case that it provides an empirical functional explanation of affective regulation.
[4] Aristotle contrasted *techne* with *episteme*, in which scientific knowledge is thought to be context independent. Flyvebjerg (2001) provides a detailed discussion.
[5] Quoted here from Flyevbjerg (2001 p56)

practical aim required for practice[6]. *Techne* implies a shift towards “the role of theory as supporting but not dictating understanding” (Braddock 2007 p6), with theory acting so to speak as a partner in the therapy, for example in Britton’s account of the clinical experiences that led to the development of the concept of triangular space:

> “Consequently it was intolerable for such patients to feel that I was communing with myself about them. The mental communion I might have with ideas from other sources, such as imagined colleagues, ancestors, or psychoanalytic theory itself, would be for them the catastrophic union” (Britton 1998 p 42).

Positioning theory thus reflects the constant interaction between practice experiences, their contexts, and theory. This dialogic process contrasts with the circularity of seeking ‘confirmation’ of theory in the data; as Hinshelwood points out, too often psychoanalytic accounts use cases to illustrate existing theory. Whilst natural science has an ideal of unified knowledge, social sciences live with uncertainties - whilst striving of course for coherence – and develop in multiple directions. So new knowledge does not lead to paradigm change, but to change occurring in waves; an uncomfortable process of splintering and division, in which new formulations can sit alongside re-evaluation, examination of past differences, comparisons and realignments. Current reflections prompt comparative and historical accounts. Hinshelwood’s (2018) discussion of Bion’s is an illuminating example, showing compellingly how Bion developed his theories within the contexts of his relationships with Klein and Winnicott. Jean White’s book *Generation; preoccupations and conflicts in contemporary psychoanalysis (2007)* undertakes a comparative critical appreciation of the strengths and limitations of each of three schools of psychoanalysis; Kleinian, British Independent, and Lacanian; she compares positions on key current clinical issues – narcissism, psychopathology, transference-counter transference and therapeutic change. Rather than trying to eradicate differences between schools, creating a false synthesis, White contextualises differences within their theoretical frameworks to identify how and why there are these differences, and their clinical significance. As Hinshelwood shows, it is necessary to discuss concepts within their theoretical frameworks if they are to be effectively compared. Comparative work can help us understand enduring differences, and can also be stimulating of new developments and links across positions to address current questions. Theory, in other words, is constantly evolving within and in response to new clinical and socio-cultural contexts.

Subjectivity

[6] Recent theoretical development in human services also make use of this. Social work, which was dominated by external research and knowledge, developed ‘practice-theory’ and practice-near (or experience-near) research, the latter drawing on psychoanalytic thinking (Froggett and Briggs 2009).

"Research on the Couch" raises complex questions about subjectivity. Natural sciences aim to reduce and if possible eliminate subjectivity, which is construed as bias; in social sciences, however, and especially in qualitative research, subjectivity guides all parts of the research process. Giddens' (1991) double hermeneutic identifies the two-way subjectivity involved in human sciences. Hinshelwood notes that natural science has identified the problem of the observer effect on experiments; probably of more significance for human sciences is Foucault's problematisation of the apparent objectivity of knowledge as operating outside social and cultural practices, language and the power relations inherent in these relationships. Knowledge is dependent upon contexts, in ways that are often culturally embedded; observations are always theory-laden. In social science the concepts of positionality and reflexivity have been developed for facilitating examination of the researcher's subjectivity. Interestingly psychoanalysis has contributed to the study of researcher subjectivity and reflexivity through applying clinical concepts and methods, notably transference and counter transference, to the research task (e.g Hollway and Jefferson 2000; Wengraf 2001, Hollway and Froggett 2012).

Reconsideration of subjectivity, including unconscious subjectivity, has implications for the study of causal relationships and meaning making. There are debates and multiple positions, of which Hinshelwood's is clearly one. The problem created by the reflexive turn is whether relativism is inevitable. Denzin (1986), for example, when stating that "Interpretive research begins and ends with the biography and self of the researcher" (Denzin 1986 p. 12) implies that objectivity is not possible. Does this relativism have to prevail? Not necessarily; others remain committed to the quest to represent the social world. The evolution of Grounded Theory (GT), a method of qualitative data analysis, which is compatible with psychoanalytic research (Anderson 2006; Rustin 2002), provides an example. The original formulation of GT (Glaser and Strauss 1967) positioned the researcher as unproblematically neutral, passive, and authoritative. Later versions of GT (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Charmaz 2006) responding to the critiques of positivism recognise the researcher's active, reflective, cultural and theory-laden influences; the observer's values, priorities, positions and actions affect understanding. The researcher's private inspirations, conscious and unconscious, and social and cultural discourses in power relations must be actively engaged and worked with in the research process. This leads in two directions; constructivism argues that knowledge is always relative, partial and subjective, but, in contrast, critical realism (Bhaskar 2008), maintains that the world of causes can be approached, albeit only approximately through our descriptions to improve clarity of concepts for processes and relationships –including causal relationships (Emmel 2013). The choice of cases[7] is crucial, especially the search for critical cases, that can verify or falsify; Hinshelwood's clinical example of repression and splitting can be considered an example of a critical case.

[7] sampling in qualitative research is usually purposive or theoretical rather than random (Emmel 2013)

What do practitioners need?

In *Research on the Couch*, Hinshelwood argues for the centrality of clinical processes, for which Freud's method is the exemplar. Situating psychoanalytic research within social sciences can have the effect of taking away the promise of certainty afforded by natural sciences; psychoanalytic theory, as *techne,* or craft-knowledge, is constantly evolving through consideration of its practice usefulness (Rustin 2007), though how this is achieved needs more formal exploration and explanation, including how clinical practice evolves under changing social conditions. Changing contexts, affecting practice profoundly, include new configurations of gender, sexuality, culture and ethnicity; new kinds of relationships and friendships; changes in ways of communicating including through online and social media, with implications, for example, on experiences of separateness (Lemma 2014); and the ubiquitous assessment and management of risks, which is a prominent societal and health care discourse (Briggs 2010).

Practice is dominated by the evidence-based practice (EBP) discourse, which exemplifies an ostensibly neutral, objective method, which however always operates within power relations[8]. Yet there is gathering evidence from Randomised Controlled Trials and systematic reviews that psychoanalytic therapies are successful in demonstrating effectiveness, mainly for short-term (Abbass et al 2014) but also for long-term psychotherapy (Fonagy 2015; Fonagy et al 2015). This is a source of confidence for psychoanalytic practitioners and indicates the importance of engagement with this discourse, despite its shortcomings as a method for assessing clinical change and outcomes, and being situated within a discourse of economic constraint. One outcome is that time-limited therapy is in demand; this has an established tradition in adult psychotherapy (Malan 1976) with methods for adolescents emerging more recently (Catty 2016, Briggs et al 2015); it can be demonstrated these provide a valuable approach suitable for many patients. A consequence of EBP is that it generates centrifugal force that produces 'new' manualised therapies designed to meet the requirements for clinical trial methods, namely, limited range therapeutic approaches, for specific mental health conditions, a differentiating process defined by the phrase "what works for whom?" Thus there are splintering and Babel-like effects, that need to be understood and responded to – whilst not neglecting to benefit from the associated energy and innovation – by centripetal processes that include comparative work, across schools, approaches and concepts.

Hinshelwood addresses how research in, of and on practice is important for psychoanalysis and contributes to its survival. Though his is one of several positions, he shows the importance and value of rigorously clarifying concepts, making comparisons across theories, and meticulously generating ways of studying key research questions. Joining with these

[8] For a critique of the RCT methodology see Lemma et al (2011)

aims appears vital for improving the systematic development of psychoanalytic knowledge and its communication, and to “defend psychoanalysis as a rigorous and evidenced body of knowledge in its own right” (Hinshelwood 2013, p2).

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