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The Psychoanalytic 'Laboratory'

Using psychoanalytically informed research interview as an experimental situation

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Introduction

If we look around, the effects of unconscious phenomena are present everywhere in everyday life, affecting our interaction with close friends or with family members, with colleagues or with people we meet in passing. They can be glimpsed behind the way we see ourselves and others, in our attitudes regarding life, love and work. Psychological researchers usually address conscious dimensions of psychic life using methods and instruments designed for this specific area of study, but unsuitable to tap into the unconscious processes.

The therapeutic aims of psychoanalysis directed the research towards the investigation in the therapeutic process and the methodology used in the research in a clinical setting (Wallerstein and Sampson, 1971; Luborsky & Crits-Christoph, 1988; Kächele, Schachte, & Thomä, 2011). This type of research overshadowed other forms of research outside the clinical setting and the development of a methodology using psychoanalytic principles and

designed for studying the unconscious phenomena. However, in the last years, psychologists and anthropologists have integrated in their research designs psychoanalytically informed methods (Hunt, 1989; Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Clarke, 2002; Hollway, 2016) in order to address the unconscious forces and motivations that provide a deeper understanding of individual experience and a better image of the research environment — how data is constructed between the researcher and the subjects. Also, psychoanalysts used their psychoanalytic knowledge to design a specific methodology for the study of unconscious phenomena outside the clinical setting. Inspired by the method of infant observation used in psychoanalytic training, Hinshelwood (2000) designed a method to observe organizations. Preliminary psychoanalytic interview guidelines for a clinical setting were used in research interview outside the clinical setting (Cartwright, 2004, Stromme, 2010).

This book offers a new perspective on the psychoanalytically informed researched interview as an experimental situation. In my opinion this is useful, I think, because it offers the possibility to test psychoanalytic theories, not only to illustrate them. The book starts by presenting the method used in different psychoanalytic research projects, and the new approach proposed. The second section offers an example of designing a research project using this new approach. As this approach uses countertransference as a source of data, for the readers unacquainted with this topic,

the evolution of ideas on the countertransference in European psychoanalysis is presented in the Appendix.

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Part I

The psychoanalytic 'laboratory'

Chapter 1

From Anxiety to Method in Social Sciences Research

In the last century, there were many controversies in psychoanalysis regarding the understanding of countertransference. The idea that countertransference can be an important tool for analysts, a source of information about the patient, has been acknowledged (Heimann, 1950; Racker, 1953; Reich, 1951; Little, 1951; Winnicott, 1949). Constantly confronted with their feelings toward their patients in long-term therapeutic relations, analysts were increasingly faced with the aspects of countertransference different from the their own transference, as it was initially formulated, and were therefore 'forced' by their practice to pay attention and to modify the initial

rigid understanding of neutrality as a lack of feelings. The applications of this perspective on countertransference as critical analyst's instrument were extended to social research. In the following lines, I discuss the views of George Devereux, one of the first authors who indicate the existence, effects and uses of countertransference in social sciences research.

Devereux's view on countertransference, as it is presented in *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioral Sciences* (1967), contains two main lines of thought that could be distinguished on observer's inner experience. On the one hand, he uses the term 'countertransference' to name the personal reactions of the observer to the observed situation, anxiety reactions related with the observer's psychic make-up, and the defenses used to alleviate anxiety. He uses the classical Freudian view: an analyst/observer's emotional reactions are transference reactions of the analyst. From this standpoint, Devereux is speaking about observers' transference to the observed subjects and observed situations.

On the other hand, he uses the term 'countertransference' to speak about the elicited countertransference — the feelings and reactions stimulated by the observed subject who inclines to ascribe to the observer a specific 'complementary role'. From this perspective, it seems that the discussion on elicited role is similar to the contemporary views on countertransference as an analyst/observer's emotional reactions created by the patient/subject.

1.1. Searching for a scientific method in the social sciences

Even if Freud (1900) in a letter to Fliess regarded himself as a conquistador, an adventurer, "not at all a man of science, not an experimenter, not a thinker" (Masson, 1985, p. 398), all his life he had been trying to pursue the goal of "winning for science the traditional object of humanistic culture — the inner life of human beings" (Makari, 2008, p. 3), and to create a psychology which was a science as any other. "Psychoanalysis, in my opinion, is incapable of creating a Weltanschauung of its own. It does not need one; it is part of science" (Freud, 1933, p. 181).

Freud thought that psychoanalysis is "a natural science like any other" (Freud, 1938, p.158), such as physics and chemistry. His work reflected an affinity with the two scientific traditions popular in Europe during the late-nineteenth century: the first one that emphasized the methodology — the scientist's findings were to be trusted only when they resulted from data derived from studies in which methods employed were designed to limit the observer's biases; the second tradition defined science in the trustworthiness of the scientist that, conscious and vigilant of his subjectivity, observes the data and forms conclusions — that are credible based on the persuasiveness and authority of the scientist who made them (Shulman, 1990).

In this context, in order to maintain the required objectivity and protect the public image of psychoanalysis, the countertransference — the analyst reaction to the patient, the expression of his or her subjectivity — was considered as a hindrance to treatment, something that must be controlled, kept in check (see also Jacobs, 1999; Carnochan, 2000). Makari (2008) suggests that for years, the countertransference "would not be discussed in public for fear it would nourish those eager to write off Freudian theory as all suggestion, just the sorry delusions of mind readers who projected their own thoughts onto their patients" (p. 232).

Freud recognized countertransference as an important issue in psychoanalytical practice, "necessary and hard to avoid" (Freud 1909a, p. 230) experiences which presents one of the most difficult problems in psychoanalytic technique (Freud, 1913a). He considered that a text on countertransference is 'sorely needed', but figured it as copies that should be circulated amongst analysts, not as a published work.[1] However, in 1912 he wrote his technical recommendations, a collection of what must not be done, advised the young analyst to "be opaque to his patients... like a mirror" (Freud, 1912a, p. 119) and advocate an attitude of neutrality toward the patient and a treatment carried out in abstinence (Freud, 1915, pp. 164 — 165).

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[1] In a letter to Jung (December 31, 1911) Freud writes: "I believe an article on countertransference is sorely needed; of course we could not publish it, we should have to circulate copies among ourselves" (McGuire, 1974, p. 476)

Freud views countertransference as the analyst's transference and refers to it as an obstacle to the analytic process that blocks the analyst's understanding of his patient: "no psychoanalyst goes further than his own complexes and internal resistances permit" (Freud, 1910a, pp. 144-145), imposing the requirement for training analysis, "a psychoanalytic purification" (Freud, 1912a, p. 116), in order to become aware of the 'blind spots' in his analytic perception, of those complexities that would be apt to interfere with his grasp of what the patient tells him. "He may not tolerate any resistances in himself which hold back from his consciousness what has been perceived by his unconscious; otherwise he would introduce into the analysis a new species of selection and distortion which would be far more detrimental than that resulting from concentration of conscious attention" (Freud, 1912a, p. 116).

In a letter to Jung, Freud commented: "giving a good deal of yourselves and expecting the patient to give something in return" is invariably an ill-advised technique, "it is best to remain reserved and purely receptive. We must never let our poor neurotics drive us crazy" (Freud, 1911, p. 476). He saw countertransference as an obstacle to the analytic process that blocks the analyst's understanding of his patient: "no psychoanalyst goes further than his own complexes and internal resistances permit" (Freud, 1910a, pp. 144-145) and insisted that the analyst should overcome his countertransference continually through self-analysis. For Freud only the transference phenomena

 were transformed from obstacles to allies in understanding the patient, and represent a source of data that "do us the inestimable service of making the patient's hidden and forgotten erotic impulses immediate and manifest" (Freud, 1912b, p. 108).

Maybe Freud's repudiation of countertransference was the reason for Devereux having to wait almost forty years to find a publisher for his book (Devereux, 1978), *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioral Sciences* (1967), where he emphasizes the inescapable presence of countertransference reactions in the observer, the ways of dealing with these reactions and the benefits of understanding countertransference as a source of pertinent data about the observed phenomena. He considers psychoanalysis as offering proper instruments and attitudes for the social sciences research.

Devereux unveils the scientist's illusion of objectivity, meaning he could observe the same phenomena that would take place in his absence. He argues that there is an actual and possible reciprocity of observation between the observer and the observed. Long before the emergence of intersubjective perspective in psychoanalysis, he emphasized the role of subjectivity in observation, from a standpoint similar with Atwood and Stolorow (1984) who view psychoanalysis as "a science of the intersubjective, focused on the interplay between the differently organized subjective worlds of the observer and the observed. The observational stance is always one within, rather than outside" (pp. 41–42).

For Devereux the inherent subjectivity of any observation is 'the royal road' to authentic research objectivity in behavioral science defined in terms of what is possible, not in what it should be. Devereux pleads for the specific character of human sciences that must be realistic sciences created only by people conscious of their own humanity involved in scientific works. Since countertransference reactions could not be eliminated, Devereux maintains that the effective methodology in behavioral science should treat these distortions as characteristic and meaningful data in research. If they are ignored or avoided, they could develop in uncontrolled and uncontrollable error sources; if they are considered as fundamental and particular data, they could be valuable resources and could produce more insights than other types of data.

Thus, Devereux departs from the Freudian view on countertransference as an obstacle, and his position is similar to that of many analysts who, in the 1950's, writes about the uses of countertransference as a source of data about the patient (Heimann, 1950; Racker, 1953; Reich, 1951; Little, 1951; Winnicott, 1949). He extends the area of this concept from the consulting room to fieldwork, and thus offers an essential tool of insight into the psychological reality of groups, organizations, and institutions observed. Following this line of thought, Stein (2004) considers that "the disciplined subjectivity of the observer/consultant reveals crucial data about what it feels like to work in the organization and hence about the organization 'itself'" (Stein, 2004, p. 325).