Main Article:

Practice-Near and Practice-Distant Methods in Human Services Research

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Abstract

This article discusses practice-near research in human services, a cluster of methodologies that may include thick description, intensive reflexivity, and the study of emotional and relational processes. Such methods aim to get as near as possible to experiences at the relational interface between institutions and the practice field. Psychoanalytically informed approaches to research are particularly fruitful here. In this article these are discussed in relation to the reflective practice and critical reflection traditions which have been widely discussed within social work, healthcare, education, and allied fields. Drawing on Clifford Geertz's distinction between experience-near and experience-distant inquiry, this article also discusses the relationship between practice-near and practice-distant approaches. These may be used in parallel to investigate different but related objects of interest and can be used to triangulate different data when focussing on the same object; finally practice-near and practice-distant methods can be combined in interpretive procedures which depend on an oscillation between immersion within and distancing from the field. It is within such interpretive activity that habits of attention and interpretation developed in clinical settings, and described in the work of Wilfred Bion, can be brought to bear usefully on data analysis.

Index Terms: research framework; research paradigm; practice-near method; practice-distant method; experience-near method; experience-distant method; psychosocial research; reflective practice; scenic composition

1. Introduction

In this article we discuss *practice-near* methods of research—an idea that was elaborated during a seminar series in the UK: "Practitioner Research and Practice-Near Methods." The series was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), UK and the practice referred to included that of social work, psychotherapy, health, and allied professions. Here, we introduce the concept of "practice-nearness" and address a major issue which arose during the seminar series: the rationale for combining practice-near and practice-distant methods, and different ways in which these might be used separately and together. We show that if psychoanalytic forms of attention and interpretation are brought to bear on the research object, a subtle intertwining of near and distant perspectives becomes possible. This opens up unconscious dimensions of experience in observation or interview based texts, in ways which enable the researcher to get close to the puzzling or provocative situations of practice.

The concept of practice-nearness was used in the series as a relatively empty signifier and one of the tasks of the series was to fill it with useful content. Social work, psychotherapy, and other caring professions import their research methodologies from the wider field of social science. These include quantitative methods which have been developed entirely independently of practice in the caring professions and appear to reflect outcomes rather than processes or context, and qualitative methods which in recent years have been heavily dominated by the semi-structured interview. The problem with these research traditions is that to a greater or lesser extent they impose the researcher's criteria of relevance on the data, and these may not reflect those of the practitioner or the people he or she works with.

2. Research in Human Services

The aim of research in human services is above all, that of influencing, changing, and validating practice. This occurs in complex multi-professional contexts where there are tensions between practice and policy, a plurality of theoretical approaches, and discrepancies between *espoused theories* and *theories-in-use*. Within social work and nursing, for example, "research mindedness" is a relatively recent development and the continuous process of practice-based knowledge generation on the ground remains localised and easily overwhelmed by managerial imperatives. Since the rise of the evidence-based practice (EBP), little value is placed on such knowledge, which is not considered to meet the standards of reliability demanded by the social scientific research community. There is an urgent need to integrate practice and research in ways that make sense to practitioners, service users, and policy makers. The rest of this article will explore the distinction between "practice-near" and "practice-distant" research in Human

Services. It will draw on examples from a particular research programme to consider how the two approaches may be used separately or combined.

2.1. Concept of Practice-Near Inquiry

Practice-near inquiry might be defined as the use of experience-near methods for practice-based or practice-relevant research. Such methods include ethnography, some forms of in-depth qualitative interviewing and observation, and the use of images and other sensory data in research. Practice-near is an related to "experience-near"—a concept developed by psychoanalyst Franz Kohut (see, e.g., Kohut, 1978), and subsequently elaborated in the socio-cultural field by the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1974). Experience for Geertz arises in the materialisation of human feeling in the symbolic forms that compose cultural systems, whether they are material artefacts or social practices. Put simply, experience-near inquiry is an investigation of the forms of feeling. By extension, practice-near enquiry would aim to achieve experience-nearness within the practice domain. It would respond to the question: what forms does practice provide for human feeling so that it becomes available for thought and communication? How can the spaces and experiences of human service be harnessed to enable a form of inquiry that eventually enhances the service and promotes innovations within it. These questions raise a research problem: how can the forms of feeling as they manifest themselves in human interactions or practices be known? This requires us to consider elements of the human service experience that can be understood through research methods which attend to its overt and easily recognisable dimensions and elements that are not so easily or directly apprehended. Geertz cautions us against any belief in the researcher's intuitive prowess, capacity for empathy, or the illusion that one can get inside someone else's skin. Instead, he advocates a hermeneutic tacking back and forth between the general forms of life and its elements, so that the whole and its elements can be understood in relation to one another.

It is worth pausing on a psychoanalytic account of the ways in which feelings attain form to assess its compatibility with Geertz's conception and ask what it supplies that Geertz did not. Essentially, it is an understanding of symbolisation, whereby words or images are used to capture emotions and sensations so that they can be thought about and communicated to others. Symbolisation is rooted in experience and a theory of symbolisation can help to establish epistemological principles for practice-near inquiry. Within the British psychoanalytic tradition and particularly within Wilfred Bion's thinking on symbolisation (Bion, 1970), the process of finding forms for human feeling depends on the container-contained relationship, whereby the symbol provides a container for feelings. The original model for the container is provided by the nursing mother who is engaged in feeding her baby both emotionally and physically, and in so doing performs an important psychic function. This will help the infant to moderate anxiety aroused by an environment which is as yet too complex to process. When the feeding process goes well the nursing mother holds her infant both in her arms and in her mind, and thus "contains" and modifies its bodily sensations and feelings. Bion uses the metaphor of "digestion" to describe a process in which she "metabolises" fragments of sense data for the infant. These would otherwise appear as "bizarre objects" which are threatening and devoid of meaning. The mother thus demonstrates to her baby that the

sensory world can be experienced, thought about, and rendered coherent. While the infant is still developing its own mental structures, the containing function is enacted by the mother as physical/emotional gesture. However, at a later stage, images and words—a system of symbols—will develop so that the growing child can contain its own anxiety and "digest" its world for itself. The metaphor has passed into popular culture—we take time to "digest" what we do not understand by bringing to bear a system of symbols which allows us to think about experience.

There are two important implications for the researcher here: First, as Bion showed, the use of symbolisation for thinking is an emotional process. Symbols, of which words are an elaborated form, are always a product of containment—or the effort to contain—and they are therefore affectively charged. This charge may appear to be neutralised when they take the form of concepts abstracted from experience, such as those normally used to account for research processes or findings. Second, experience-nearness is not the same as *empathic identification* where the inquirer has the illusion of fusing with (feeling with) his or her object. Geertz insisted that, getting as close as possible to people's experience does not involve feeling their feelings or thinking their thoughts. Rather, it denotes everyday communication about a presumed shared world. For Geertz experience-near research involves "thick description," a noticing and revealing of the fine-grained texture of the forms of life of the people studied: their customs, practices, lived experience of political and organisational structures, and their everyday interactive order.

Geertz (1974) contrasted experience-near concepts like "love" with others such as "object cathexis" which are more typical of the "experience-distant" abstractions of social science. There is nothing pejorative in the term experience-distant. In social research experience-nearness is not enough—on its own it leaves us "awash in immediacies" (Geertz's expression) while experience-distance, on its own, consigns us to jargons and abstractions. Experience-distant methods include those which try to erase or bypass the subjectivity of the researcher, such as social surveys and randomised control trials, but the term also refers to the "objectifying" or distancing gaze employed by the researcher who attempts to "stand back" and take a dispassionate view of the object. According to Geertz, an alternation or oscillation between near and distant perspectives is required. What Bion's account of symbolisation and containment adds is an awareness that however near or distant our concepts to experience, their non-identity with the reality they contain is inevitable; putting this to effective and imaginative use in the service of inquiry depends on how we contain the frustration the non-identity can produce, and whether we can realise the potential it offers for new understandings. In other words, Bion shows the necessity of a state of mind and attention which can use the near-distant oscillation of thought to best advantage. In this way researchers can avoid reliance on empathic identification which may induce the illusion of communion that Geertz was at pains to avoid.

This bears on a series of issues that arise when we address the problem of how we can best combine experience-near and experience-distant methods in human services research. More specifically: whether and how to combine quantitative and qualitative research paradigms; how to combine a good ethnographic eye with interpretive distance; how to move beyond an over-reliance on verbal text-based data and work with the visual

and other sensory repertoires; how to represent the quality of subjective experience without losing analytical rigour.

2.2. Reflective Practice and Critical Reflection Tradition

Across the human services there has been some movement away from a technocratic model of practice-based inquiry. Reflective practice and critical reflection, as described here, can be seen as steps in the direction of practice-near enquiry. The notion of the reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983) has gained widespread currency in social work, nursing, and education. It emphasises a radically situated view of the sense-making which accompanies practice-based "craft" where fragments of knowledge and ambiguous information exist a field of tensions. In assessing what counts as "evidence," developments in the reflective-practice tradition incline to a combination of critical analysis with a processual and relational view of a mutable practice terrain that demands a reflexive practitioner-inquirer. In such conditions, knowledge generation involves the drawing of inferences and testing of hypotheses, or sometimes "hunches," through iterative cycles of reflection and testing (Kolb, 1994) as the reflective practitioner moves between reflection on and in action. Implied is an open questioning stance in relation to processes and events, followed by conceptualisation and analysis and an iterative re-immersion in the field of experience.

The reflective practitioner model has been revised further in the light of anti-oppressive practice. Critically reflective practice combines emphasis on practitioner reflection in the process of knowledge production with social critique based on an analysis of power relations, discrimination, and prejudice (see White, Fook, & Gardner, 2006). Informed by postmodern and constructivist perspectives, it recognises the importance of emotionality in professional-client relationships while directing the researcher towards a "close-up" view of the intricate ways in which power informs practice-based knowledge generation. Both reflective practice and critical reflection models aim for conceptual clarity while remaining tolerant of the messiness of practice realities, and of "not knowing" for parts of the reflective cycle.

2.3. Psychoanalytically Informed Psychosocial Research

The "not knowing" has remained largely untheorised in the literature on reflective practice and it is here that psychoanalytically informed approaches to psychosocial research may have something to offer in that they are able to account for unconscious and unarticulated dimensions of experience. Using Michael Polanyi's notion of *tacit knowledge*, Schön highlighted the importance of what practitioners do not consciously know or cannot express although they use it in their daily practice. This is precisely the kind of uncertain knowledge often implicated in what Schön called the "murky lowlands" of practice, where judgements often have to be made in the absence of clear information. He contrasted this terrain with the clear "high ground" of theory. In psychoanalytic thinking, these metaphors echo a distinction between embodied knowing and conceptual thought, which enable researchers to ask how far it might be possible to attend to unconscious processes that take place within the research encounter and data analysis.

The capacity for "free-floating attention" and "negative capability" (Bion, 1970) developed in clinical settings signify a quality of perception, attention, and reflection which can allow the murky practice terrain to present itself without the imposition of the researcher's preconceptions. This mental attitude has long been considered one of the hallmarks of mature responsive practice. The same capabilities translated into the context of research clearly point beyond the well-worn formula of the semi-structured interview and thematic analysis which has dominated qualitative research in the last 2 or 3 decades. They take us in the direction of methodologies which have been neglected in the evidence-based practice movement, and which have not attracted significant support from funders. These include: observational and phenomenological studies of interactions (Hollway, 2009; Reid, 1997; Rhode, 2004; Urwin, 2007; Urwin & Sternberg, 2012), detailed ethnographies of practice (Riemann, 2005), biographic and narrative methods (Bereswill, 2004; Froggett & Chamberlayne, 2004; Hollway & Jefferson, 2012), systematic or "depth" reflexivity (Froggett & Wengraf, 2004; Nicholson, 2009) and holistic and syncretistic approaches to data interpretation (Froggett & Hollway, 2010; Hollway & Froggett, 2012). A compilation of articles on practice-near approaches appeared as a special issue of the *Journal of Social Work Practice* (Froggett & Briggs, 2009).

Many of the methods cited above have been explored within a developing body of cross-disciplinary psychosocial thinking that combines psychoanalytic and critical social perspectives and also has something to offer practice-near research (Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Hoggett, 2009; Froggett, 2012; Stenner, 2008). For example, when applied to social policy, it has sought to understand how welfare structures and practice-based relationships constitute each other (Cooper & Lousada, 2005; Froggett, 2002; Hoggett, 2000), and in empirical studies it takes from the clinical domain a concern for how we attend to the processes of human interaction we are involved in. In the research relationship this implies a reflexive consciousness which assumes that both researcher and researched are defended subjects (Hollway & Jefferson, 2012) and that unconscious and conscious dimensions of interaction are at play in data collection and analysis. In-depth reflexivity that draws on psychoanalytic perspectives for social scientific inquiry has been identified as one of the defining features of psychosocial research (Clarke, 2006). This raises the question of how far the psychodynamics of *transference* and *countertransference* can be understood and articulated outside of the clinical situation. Research relationships are time limited, removed from therapeutic purpose, and bound by frameworks of ethical governance oriented towards social inquiry rather than therapeutic outcomes (Hunt, 1989). There are unresolved questions about what kind of non-conscious processes can reliably be accessed in research: from the Freudian repressed unconscious, to the ideographic manifestations of *primary process* (Ehrenzweig, 1967/1970; Milner, 1950/2010), traces of *personal idiom* (Bollas, 1989, 1992), historically specific structures of *collective feeling* or states of mind (Cooper & Lousada, 2005; Froggett, 2002; Hoggett, 2000); the *ethno-psychological unconscious* described by Devereux (Devereux, 1967; Giami, 2001), Jungian *archetypes* (Jung, 1981), Deleuzian *affect flows* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2004), or merely the not-yet-articulated tacit knowledge of the reflective practice tradition. Which unconscious phenomena are an "admissible" object of social scientific inquiry is a question which will probably preoccupy psychosocial researchers for some decades to come. However, in the field of practice, certain phenomena such as

the transference-saturated nature of normal professional-client interactions have practical implications for policies and interventions and require further research.

Whereas the greater part of psychosocial research in the UK that bears on human services is informed by post-Kleinian and object relations psychoanalysis, there are cognate traditions in Europe: informed by Lacanian perspectives (for a Lacanian approach to child welfare, see Van Nijnatten, 2010) or influenced by the work of cultural analyst and psychoanalyst Alfred Lorenzer (1986) in Germany and Scandinavia. These also attempt to combine psychoanalytically informed thinking with critical social theory in order to overcome the psyche/society binary that has bedevilled social science. From the perspective of practitioners there are pressing reasons to adopt "real-world" approaches to research which avoid psychological or sociological reductionism, and which can grasp complexity and social embeddedness. In order to illustrate some of the characteristics of practice-near research we turn now to examples which show how practice-near and practice-distant methods can be used in conjunction with one another.

3. Practice-Nearness and Practice-Distance: Separate, Together, or Intertwined?

The examples elaborated here attempt to show three different configurations in which practice-near and practice-distant perspectives can be used in research. The examples are all taken from an evaluation of an arts programme sited in a large general teaching hospital in the UK. The programme in question was designed to enhance the experience of the hospital as a healing and teaching environment. It has been described in detail elsewhere (Froggett & Little, 2012). The art work ranged from exhibitions of visual drawing, painting and photography in especially designed exhibition spaces, music in the atrium and on the wards, a digital installation in the reception area, mosaics produced by mental health service users, and object handling from museum boxes presented at patients' bedsides (Noble & Chatterjee, 2008). A range of experience and practice-near and practice-distant data collection methods were employed in this evaluation study. These methods are tabulated below for the sake of clarity.

Table 1. *Methods Used for Evaluating the UK Hospital Arts Programme*

Relatively Practice-Near Methods (PN)	Relatively Practice-Distant Methods (PD)
Ethnographic observation using free-floating attention and thick description	Structured observation for hourly intervals recorded on observation scale
Unstructured, ad hoc, narrative-pointed interviews conducted in situ with people engaged with art-work; open questions	Semi-structured interviews with staff, service users, and visitors
Photographic reportage of people engaged with artwork or handling museum objects	Generic quality of life scales to assess satisfaction, health status and mood.
Comments box placed by street gallery	E-mail canvass of staff opinion

The methods were used in different combinations to understand how people engaged with artworks and the effects of the art upon them. Three main configurations emerged: different methods used for different objects (practice-near [PN] and practice-distant [PD]

methods used separately), different methods used for the same object so as to achieve triangulation (PN and PD together); different methods used in an interdependent, imbricated manner (PN and PD intertwined).

3.1. Separate Methods, Separate Objects

This made sense where completely different research questions were at issue. Thus a structured observation scale was piloted and developed to assess numbers of people looking at artworks in the gallery space at different times of the day, while narrative bedside interviews elicited contemplation of existential vulnerability stimulated by music. If these two methods and sites had been the only two used in the programme, there would effectively have been two separate pieces of research. To practitioners they would have illustrated respectively the therapeutic potential of music, and the potential for obstruction by lingering viewers while passing through the gallery. The former would have yielded something intrinsically relevant to practice: the therapeutic use of music. The latter would have produced something extrinsically relevant in that it supplied knowledge which enabled staff to maintain workflow in a busy hospital environment. Of course the scale was also highly suggestive of the enjoyment people experienced by looking at artworks, but in order to find this out for sure it was necessary to triangulate practice-distant (or experience-distant) results (a count of the people stopping to look) with practice-near (or experience-near) ones (narrative interviewing to elicit subjective response). In the programme as a whole, these different forms of data then fed into an overall account of the contribution art was making in this hospital environment.

3.2. Separate Methods, Same Object

Methodologically speaking, things get rather more interesting when practice-near and practice-distant methods are used to study the same objects and the results are triangulated. This occurred when people were observed interacting with the artworks and then interviewed. A structured observation scale was developed and tested by the field researcher, in which certain behaviours were considered indicating different levels of interest.

Table 2. *Observable Behaviours for Different Levels of Interest*

Level of Interest	Observable Behaviour
Ignored	Glanced or paid little attention
Engaged	Showed interest or appeared curious (peering, stopping to look/listen) for less than 10 seconds
Engaged+	Showed animated interest (approaching to see better, smiling, nodding head, for less than one minute)
Engaged++	As above, for longer than 1 minute
Engaged +++	As above, but more animated (signalling to someone, viewing from a variety of angles, sustained gaze), lasting for 3 minutes or more

The value of this exercise was that numbers of people and their levels of engagement with artworks at different times of day could be plotted and compared between exhibitions to assess popularity. The chart below shows results for an exhibition of historical photographs taken from the hospital archives. When compared with interview data it helped to establish that art that clearly referenced the hospital and its history was appreciated because it enabled people to establish a link with the institution.
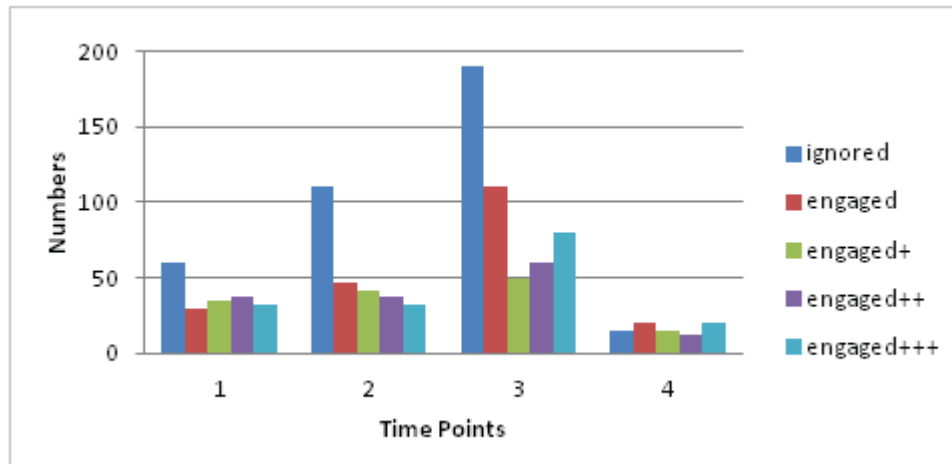

Figure 1. Observation of viewers' engagement at the exhibition of historical photographs.

Note. Time points: *1* = 09:00-10:00; *2* = 10:10-11:10; *3* = 11:45-12:45; *4* = 17:45-18:45

Ad hoc interviews with people who had just been observed engaging with the artwork then elicited spontaneous accounts of experience. Thus "outsider" and "insider" perspectives were triangulated—the meaning ascribed by the researcher and the subjective attribution of meaning by the viewers.

3.3. Near and Distant Perspectives Intertwined

In the methodological combinations described above, choice of method determined the quality of data and the possibility of a depth hermeneutic informed by psychoanalytic perspectives. For example, some of the comments made by severely ill patients after having music played by their bedsides gave rise to interpretations of guilt, gratitude, and mourning.

> Funny how this . . . funny, funny little things, that you don't expect to register, really came out with a bang, it was a surprise . . . After a time I come to respect these musicians, they hit a chord that puts you on the stroke of life, when you are young you don't know best, yet, you have all this stuff in front of you, I may get over this period, I've done my best for my family . . . I feel sorry, even for these villains, killing and maiming. (Patient)

In this extract there is a compression of emotion stimulated by the music which surprises and elicits gratitude ("I've come to respect"). The patient "resonates" with the music and

makes use of it to muster his own biographical resources ("they hit a chord that puts you on the stroke of life"); there is a realistic appraisal of vulnerability and condition ("I may get over this"); finally there is a moral self-evaluation and willingness to contemplate closure ("I've done my best for my family") which leads to compassion ("I feel sorry"). The "feel" of the statement is profoundly reparative. In Melanie Klein's (1975) thinking this would indicate a "depressive position" which is orientated to gratitude and the desire to repair damage that one may have done. In order to collect this data an open narrative interview was conducted in what at that moment was the patient's "natural" setting of the bedside, when his immediate responses to the music were still active. It is entirely possible to deconstruct his statement (an operation which confers experience-distance). However, its emotional impact was achieved through a metaphor—"a chord that puts you on the stroke of life," and here the distance began to break down: the metaphor confers closeness to the quality of the experience—the patient's psychological state bound up with his situation, elements of which remain distinct yet indissoluble in the "chord" which binds his own finite existence to a life and culture of which the researcher is a part.

Sensitisation to the aesthetic of language (or behaviour or environment) is common in the interpretation of narrative interviews. It is obviously appropriate in an evaluation of an arts programme which is designed to activate aesthetic sensibility, but it may also be used in practice-near research to apprehend the tonalities, textures and forms of everyday life. Attunement to the aesthetics of experience is particularly important in the psychoanalytic thinking of Wilfred Bion (1962, 1970), and also in the work of German cultural analyst, Alfred Lorenzer (see Froggett & Hollway, 2010; Hollway & Froggett, 2012). Consider the following account which emerged from the researcher's ethnographic observation, not of the art programme, but of the hospital's atrium on an ordinary working day, and the comings and goings within it.

> The atrium rises skywards towards the light, floor upon floor. Outside passers-by look in through the glass facade. High up, a huge minimalist mural in primary colours stands out against the pristine expanse of white wall. On the ground, purposeful flows of human traffic execute the business of modern healthcare. Screens line the reception desk; people are briskly logged into information systems and directed to departments. Uniforms designate professional roles—instructions are issued, protocols enacted, orderly queues await attention. Commerce has its place—those who wait can usefully pass the time shopping. The atrium is more "mall" than "town square," a public arena with seating, stalls, and coffee outlet, where people browse, drink, and spend in the bright white sterility and crisp contours of the building. Without the uniforms one could be in a bank, or an insurance company or any modern office condo. The clean, modern design of this "private finance initiative" hospital suggests accurate expert diagnoses, brisk efficiency, and dependable outcomes. All is transparency, efficacy, and above all "externality"—inviolable surfaces, visibly accessible horizons, defined boundaries, leaving no hidden corners where pestilence might lurk, or people might escape to grieve. In such a place the triumphal order of modern techno-medicine reigns. Into this space come the sick, shuffling, and

> pyjama-ed, passing through the area, attached to plastic bags of bright body
> fluids: blood, urine, mucus and faeces—hectic colours against ascetic
> whiteness, moving past the coffee drinkers, cleaners, carers, computer
> operators.

This account has been developed from the original observation note—it remains faithful to the scene as the researcher experienced it, and descriptively accurate, yet it has been "crafted" by the researcher and another member of the research team, in order to convey not only the factually accurate detail of the scene, but also—through the aesthetic of the writing—its feeling. The crafting of the text controls the background assumptions so that the form of words is adequate to the feeling aroused in the researchers which they in turn attempt to elicit in the reader. Spence (1982) points out that it is by controlling background assumptions that the author's system of meaning with all its cultural reference points becomes relatively easily available to the reader who is freed up for imaginative association and who can then bring his or her own experience to bear on the text.

Psychoanalyst and cultural analyst Alfred Lorenzer (1986) referred to the "interaction forms" that make up the symbolic structure of a scene and that are partly personal to the observer/author and partly deriving from a common culture. It is these interaction forms that "shape" the way a text is written and induce the reader to experience it. In this example, we experience the "personal" element though the way in which the writer constructs a rather dystopic image for the reader, choosing the language and style that expresses not only observations but also the subjective response of the observer. We understand the writer's view partly by emotional and aesthetic identification and partly through common cultural reference points in the text. We can thus share the writer's unease at the "dehumanising" effects of technical information systems, commerce, and private profit in a medical setting, and we are "jolted" by the fact that seems no place for the shuffling sick in this pristine modern hospital. The point is that we need both the relatively objective "practice-distant" account of the observable features of the atrium and the "practice-near" experiential perspective of the observer in order to gain an intelligible view not only of the physical environment but how it works on the feelings and relations of the people who use it. In line with the previous account of symbolisation in this article, the authors of this piece are finding a form for feeling which "contains" experience and are rendering it in such a way that readers can experience it for themselves in terms of their own experience and cultural knowledge.

Froggett and Hollway (2010) have referred to devices such as the short piece on the hospital atrium as "scenic compositions," drawing on Lorenzer's (see Bereswill, Redman, & Morgenroth, 2010) notion of "scenic understanding." The scenic composition becomes a meeting point between personal sensibility and biographical experience of the author/researcher and that of the reader, as they encounter shared aspects of their culture. Individual responses are to some extent idiosyncratic but the scene can be decoded because of this shared culture—in this case it enables a contextual understanding of the contemporary juxtaposition of shopping and healthcare. In the rendering of this particular scene, the elements appear as they might present themselves to any casual observer, but

there is also something uncomfortable which jars or provokes (the appearance of sick people). Lorenzer's methodological injunction is to follow the provocation as this will open up the text and reveal unconscious societal-cultural anxieties which press on the scene, and which are unwittingly conveyed in the writing. In this case, the anxieties probably derive from the "threat" of privatisation to a national health service. It is no accident that the most popular exhibition observed during the evaluation was "Scenes From the Archive" consisting of historical photographs depicting the old Victorian hospital, and the stable, reliable, hierarchical, and non-commercial model of healthcare which it stood for. The provocation in the scene also brings into play personal wishes on the part of the researchers for a healthcare system that is both effective and humane. It leads to an unarticulated cultural disquiet about the care that these privately financed and ultra-modern hospitals might provide, and about whether there is room for vulnerability within them. The information systems, efficiency, professionalism, sterility, architecture, even the artwork, do nothing to assuage this anxiety; indeed they somehow compound it. The ultimate provocation is the "shocking" appearance of the sick, seemingly out of place, and out of time, with their ravaged interiors, leaky orifices, and awkward gait.

In order to write a scenic composition, an interplay between experience-distant observation and experience-near attentiveness is required. The starting point is the relatively dispassionate observation of the scene in which its elements are noted and pondered. Fine detail is important here and, at first, things do not necessarily fit together. The coffee outlet, the computer terminals and the mural are simply disconnected phenomena. The researcher must work at this jumble of facts, at first not knowing how to make sense of them, as they have no intelligible order. The irony is that the closer one peers at the detail the less able one is to experience the scene one is contemplating. After thorough familiarisation, and compiling of field-notes, and probably after some time has elapsed, the researcher mentally "steps back" and is able to survey the whole in the mind's eye. The gestalt of the scene then becomes clearer, at least in pictorial terms. The "distancing" allows apprehension of the underlying structure. At this point, and not before, the researcher is ready to write the scenic composition "as it comes," presenting the experience in writing. If the imagination has freed itself from the morass of fact and the researcher has achieved a free-floating attention in relation to the whole, words come easily and the translation of visual data into language will be recognisable; so too will the researcher's own distinctive perspective and background assumptions, complete with dissonances and provocations that point in the direction of societal cultural anxieties and contradictions. Only a little crafting will be needed here and there in the interests of better control of background assumptions that have already revealed themselves spontaneously in the aesthetic of the writing. The overall gestalt will not be altered. At play here is an oscillation between experience-near and experience-distant modes of apprehending the scene which mirrors the oscillations of attention and interpretation (Bion 1970) or of analytic and syncretistic perception (Ehrenzweig, 1970; Froggett, 2005) characteristic of practice.

4. Conclusion

The conceptualisation of practice-near research, which has potential relevance throughout human service professions, was stimulated by the lack of research mindedness among many social work practitioners in the UK, despite the fact that there has been much discussion of the opportunities and limits of practitioner research. If anything, the advent of evidence-based practice had seemed to alienate practitioners further because of a perceived lack of congruence between practice-based concerns and the research community, and the lack of "fit" between methodologies of inquiry and methodologies of intervention. The key problem appeared to be the question of how the experiences of practitioners and the people they work with could inform the research process. The reflective practice tradition, and its later development in research as critical reflection, has come closest to resolving these difficulties by acknowledging the indistinct and emotionally inflected nature of the practice terrain, and the tacit unarticulated knowledge that practitioners develop within it. However it is mainly within psychoanalytically informed psychosocial research that the unknown, the unconscious, and the unarticulated, have been explored. This requires a form of reflexivity sensitised to the to-and-fro movement between nearness to, and distance from, the object as the researcher's attention shifts back and forth in the effort to attend to it.

The question that arises is about how far techniques and capacities such as "evenly hovering attention" and "negative capability," developed in the clinical situation can be used within social inquiry. A key concern of psychosocial research has been to overcome a psyche/social binary. Transposed to the practice field, this maps on to a polarity between practice-nearness, conceived as a preoccupation with micro-interactions of relationships, and practice-distance, conceived as aggregate outcomes and policy. Exploration of the ideas of practice-nearness and practice-distance has allowed us to problematise this binary, and has impelled us to ask how the two approaches may be used alongside each other, or integrated. By way of illustration we have drawn on a single mixed-method research programme to present three possible couplings of practice-near and practice-distant methods. Each of these couplings has its own rationale but it is only by bringing psychoanalytically sensitive forms of attention and interpretation to bear on the object that a productive imbrication or intertwining of practice-nearness and practice-distance is achieved. When this is done the distinctive personal biographies and dispositions of individuals can be brought into relation with a situation which is rendered intelligible in terms of shared culture, and the gap between thought and its object can, to some extent, be attenuated.

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