

Critical realism and psycho-social method: researching variable agency by using BNIM? ¹

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Starting from within sociology, George Cavalletto's recent *Crossing the psycho-social divide: Freud, Weber, Adorno and Elias* (2007) makes a powerful case that all good sociologically-sophisticated explanations of large-scale societal processes and mutations necessarily involve an overt or covert complex historical psychology. Quite unrelated, starting from within psychodynamic psychology, an earlier book *The Systems Psychodynamics of Organisations* edited by Gould, Stapley and Stein (2001) argued that the dynamics of organisational (and by implication other) process cannot be sufficiently understood by a micro psychology which ignores the 'larger systems'. They need an understanding of 'systems', systems-thinking.

In this chapter I attempt to explore the way in which two existing traditions of social thinking and research -- Critical Realism and Psycho-Social studies -- can be related to each other, can help correct each other's current defects in understanding historically-variably agency. It also suggests how one method for collecting and interpreting data -- a method for collecting and interpreting interview histories of lived experience, the Biographical-Narrative-Interpretive Method (BNIM) -- has been and is being used in a way which fosters a crossing of that psycho-social divide. Looking briefly at some research examples. I end with some questions about concepts and capacity for studying reality 'psycho-societally'.²

Questions and concepts of psychosocietal agency

In Western discourse at the moment, the term 'agency' is used differently in two separate spheres of discourse.

In Western political and administrative regimes at the moment, the term 'agency' is adopted and adapted by neoliberal discourse to provide a favourable gloss for the rolling-back of, and for savage attacks on, the protective and welfare functions of the state, on social rights. Obscuring the de-regulation of the labour market and the destruction of state welfare support for what used to be called 'citizens', the discourse focuses on the 'responsibilisation' of individuals and families and private self-groupings and alleges a promotion of their 'agency' under conditions of unevenly decreasing possibility of effective action. Others will write about regimes in the previously-soviet bloc.

¹ The argument in this chapter partly resumes the argument developed at greater length in my paper for the Wroclaw Conference (Wengraf 2010, available on request), now available in Wengraf with Chamberlayne 2013. This paper (in Polish) will be published in 2014 by Mrozowicki et al.

² There are a lot of single inverted commas in this text (' and'). This device indicates that the 'term' in question is or should be a focus of attention, that it should not be absorbed unquestioningly. Language is not a transparent medium.

Over a longer period, in Western social sciences the term ‘agency’ has been usually counterposed to notions of determinism in the explanation of all behaviour. It suggests either the possibility or the inevitability of the moment of ‘self-determination by people’, whatever the weight of the social or other structures and factors involved. Hence such coupled terms as ‘agency and structure’ or ‘agency and inevitability’. “Men make their own history, but....”.

The term ‘agency’ therefore slides too easily between multiple scientific and multiple ideological uses. Here we are concerned with a sub-set of Western-social-scientific uses of the term.

Current research concepts of ‘critical realism’ and the ‘psycho-social’, and their notions of ‘agency’

I suggest that critical realism as currently articulated tends towards the one-sidedly sociological and that psychosocial studies as currently articulated tends towards the one-sidedly psychological.

Critical Realism I consider to be a crucial research philosophy but one which is interpreted currently in an excessively sociological manner, and therefore needs qualification. Its potential and its dangers may be fairly represented by the following argument of a British social theorist, Margaret Archer, about the reflexive deliberation of agents.

What is distinctive about social realism, but needs to be developed, is that the reflexive deliberations of agents do indeed have their own ‘intrinsic’ effects in modifying the lives of subjects themselves, but also ‘extrinsic’ effects, by *modifying the cultural and structural properties (CEPs and SEPs) of their societies*. There is only one story because we make our lives, at least in part, by deliberating *upon the structural and cultural contexts in which we find ourselves*, often involuntarily. It is our deliberations which determine what we will make of the constraints and enablements which we confront....
(Archer 2003: 52), *italics added*.

This relatively balanced account by Archer as taken up by an intermediary can eventually inadvertently legitimate a rather simple-minded psychology. The moment of subjective ‘deliberation’ is not explored, but assumed.

An excerpt from a recent critical realist PhD thesis shows the dangers of this.

Oltman (2009: 71) cites her intermediary Berth Danermark et al in saying the following:

Danermark *et al.* (2002, 182) argue that ...[one should] link structure and agency, and to study the interplay between social structure and agency. They sum it up rather well:

The most productive contribution to social practice that social science can make, we conclude, is the examination of social structures, their powers and liabilities, mechanisms and tendencies, so that people, groups and organizations may consider them in their interaction and so – if they wish – strive to change or eliminate existing social structures and to establish new ones. Another contribution may be predictions of how interplay and structural elaboration will appear in the future. (Danermark et al 2008: 182)

We are invited by Danermark to turn our social-science attention to examining the out-there ‘interaction of social structures’. If examination or deliberation by those we study (let alone ourselves) is fallible, the reasons are presented as exclusively social, citing Archer:

there can indeed be *social* factors which affect our outlooks without the agent correctly diagnosing them... (Archer 2003: 52; italics addedTW)

And Oltman pursues her argument to a very crass and economist conclusion

Individuals make decisions based on self-interest and society is a result of the interaction of personal self-interest
(Oltman 2009: 71).

The slippage towards Oltman’s extreme sociology (economism) results from insufficient care in Archer’s formulations mediated by even less care in Danermark et al.

Contrast this with Roy Bhaskar, the founder of Critical Realism, who claimed that for critical realists

“in contrast to the hermeneutical perspective...actors’ accounts are both corrigible and limited by the existence of unacknowledged conditions, unintended consequences, tacit skills and *unconscious motivations*; but in opposition to the positivist view, actors’ accounts form the indispensable starting point of social inquiry.” (Bhaskar 1998c, p. xvi, cited by Mrozowicki and Turk (forthcoming). Italics added, TW.)

Let us now consider another development, this time in psychology in the UK and maybe elsewhere, the recent emergence of something called ‘psycho-social studies’.

An early statement of the ‘psycho-social’ perspective by Professor Wendy Hollway of the Open University and a key figure in the ‘Critical Psychology’ movement, :

In this perspective, we are psycho-social because we are products of a unique life history of anxiety- and desire- provoking life events and the manner in which they have been transformed in internal reality.

We are psycho-social because such defensive activities affect and are affected by material conditions and discourses (systems of meaning which pre-exist any given individual); because unconscious defences are intersubjective processes (i.e. they affect and are affected by others with whom we are in communication); and because of the real events in the external, social world which are discursively, desirously and defensively appropriated (Hollway 2004: 7).

Hollway’s formulations were a great leap forward, but are no longer sufficient.

- What about the “real events in the external, social world” which are not known to the actor, which are ignored or denied, people with whom we are not in communication but with whom we have objective relations (through the world market, through climate change, through military onslaught, or through the CIA)?

- Is the external world just reduced to a supply of “events”? What about our CR-sociological interest in “social structures, their powers and liabilities, mechanisms and tendencies”?
- What about a “life-historical developmental account” of societies (not just of (situated) selves) and even of (moments of) the world-system currently in extreme crisis?

I cannot say that the ‘societal-historical’ is absent from Hollway’s programmatic statement, but it certainly seems ‘not fleshed out equally’: the ‘social’ in this concept of the ‘psycho-social’ appears primarily as the ‘immediately social’ of social psychology. The larger-external-societal and the longer historical seem decisively rear-grounded

Archer’s social realism and Hollway’s psycho-social realism as described above hold much promise as separate research programmes. However, each is inadequate for the ‘world’ that is not their primary focus: the notion of the ‘rationally-deliberating individual getting it wrong only for social reasons’ (sociologist Archer); the notion of the ‘non-immediate, merely event-providing external societal world’ (psychologist Hollway).

What would overcome the weaknesses of both programmes as currently formulated would be a combined programme, integrating but going beyond the immediately social of ‘Psychosocial Studies’ towards the larger macro-structures of the societal, and a concept of the psychology of people and individuals which includes Archer’s “deliberating” but has a more intra-psychic understanding of the limitations of conscious rationality.

How to proceed?

In the spirit of Bhaskar’s original concept of Critical Realism (see Wengraf 2010), I shall postulate that there is only one single Reality – which can be partly grasped by a notion of the full ‘psycho-societal’ and that the different ‘worlds’ postulated with or without inverted commas to avoid error must be seen as more or less useful (and, if careless, mind-stultifying) abstractions.

I shall cite one thinker representing a harsh separation of the two ‘worlds’ and another I think rather more useful one.

Paul Hoggett, Professor at the University of the West of England, calls for accounts of the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ worlds as being governed by what he calls ‘separate rules of structure formation’, even though they “overlap” and are “mutually constituting” (a contradiction not obviously easy to handle):

I also firmly believe that the internal and external worlds, while overlapping and mutually constituting, are also irreducible to one another. Each is governed by its own rules of structure formation.

For the inner world, these rules are part of what we call our psycho-logic. One of the great contributions of psychoanalysis has been to contribute to our understanding of these rules – condensation, displacement, repression, splitting, projection, identification, and so on. These

constitute the rules of structure formation of our inner world..... I would go so far as to say that they can be discerned at work in all human societies; they are, in this sense, constitutive of what it means to be human.

Similarly, I believe that the external world has its own rules of structure formation, rules that govern economy and society. Marx's notion of the law of expanded reproduction of the capitalist mode of production (Luxemburg and Bukharin, 1972), would be an example.

Such rules of structure formation, though generative, are not visible; their existence has to be inferred.. And this requires a going beneath and beyond the surface (Hoggett 2008: 383).

This formulation has the advantage of the support of separate research programmes and conceptual models of actually-existing psycho-analysis and political economy, and mapping onto the Archer and Hollway 'separations'. The disadvantage is the acceptance of a notion of quite different realities with separate rules of 'structure formation'. This is too high a price to pay. Except as a first approximation, it does not cross over but instead entrenches the psycho-societal divide.

A counter-model is a single four-level map between the macro-order and states of mind, constructed by Lynn Froggett, Professor at the University of Central Lancashire, in her *Love, Hate and Welfare*. Concerned with the 'imagined subject of welfare settlements', her argument is more general:

Froggett (2002) [maps] out a theoretical and conceptual terrain on which the imagined subject of specific social welfare settlements can be depicted. She argues that this subject is analytically positioned between four interpenetrating domains of analysis: the *macro* political and economic order; *institutional* cultures that reproduce the social relations of welfare; *interpersonal* relationships implicated in caring and helping; and the *states of mind* and socially structured defences invoked by these relationships.

She concludes that the imaginative and practical linking of these domains is continually attempted, and sometimes achieved... and may be illuminated by biographical research methodology (Froggett and Wengraf 2004: 96 italics added).

For our purposes, this is a less one-sided account than the socio-centric model of Archer or the intra-psychic-centric models of Hollway, and less 'segregated' than the 'separate rules of structure' argued for by Hoggett.

What then of 'agency'?

A key term in the Critical Realist tradition, it has been given different meanings, that can be represented along two axes: (i) inherent in the human condition, but/or historically variable according to variable internal and/or external psycho-societal regimes; (ii) an attribute of individuals and/or only of groups

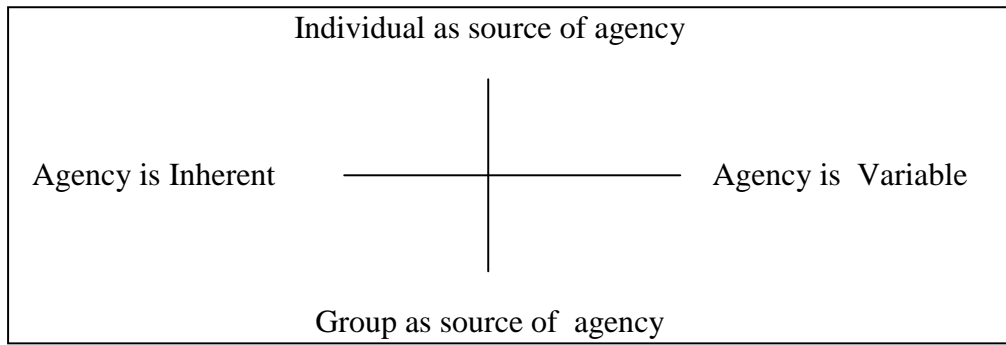


Figure 1 The four sources of variable agency

My argument is that all four squares of this quadrant have explanatory power. There is in every mind that has started to develop and has not been damaged a capacity for subjective deliberation (and therefore reflexive agency). Psycho-societal events (e.g. trauma) and regimes inside and outside the individual mind influence, enhance or obstruct and reduce such agency; agency of different potencies can be enabled or reduced by other individuals or by groups.

To sum up. Using (and inevitably partially mis-representing) Archer and Hollway as examples of (qualified) one-sidedness, I have argued that a more balanced and fully developed psycho-societal approach to human research involves equal attention to both the inner and the outer world, in a way indicated by Hoggett and in a more CR-compatible way by Froggett.

In accordance with the ontology and epistemology of Bhaskar's Critical Realism, there is only one reality and the 'regimes' of the two alleged 'worlds' should be seen as both distinct but also as at least partially co-constituting of a single psycho-societal reality. The sources of 'agency' are individual and group, the nature of agency is both inherent and historically variable.

How can this reality be researched and described?

One usable component of a full-spectrum psycho-societal method: BNIM interviewing and interpretation protocols

How might we think the concept of a full-spectrum psycho-societal methodology? Everybody will have their own answer. A minimum is probably one methodology component focused on eliciting material relating to the inner world (e.g. interview, personal documents, or other symbolic expression), and another methodology component focused on the outer world (e.g. observation).

BNIM research interviewing is a strong component of a full-spectrum psycho-societal method. In this section we can provide only an introduction.³

The BNIM interview is composed of three sub-sessions.

In the first sub-session, the interviewer offers only a carefully constructed single narrative question, e.g.

. “Please tell me the story of your life, all the events and experiences that have been important to you personally; begin wherever you like, I won’t interrupt, I’ll just take some notes for afterwards in case I have any further questions”

and sticks to the promises given. For most research purposes, instead of “*your life*” a research-relevant period or phase is specified: e.g. “*the story of your working life*”, “*the story of your life since you first thought of getting a boyfriend/girlfriend*”, etc.

During Sub-session One, the interviewer asks no further questions and gives no indication of how the interviewee should proceed. All she does is to note cue-phrases in the narration that can serve as possible agenda items for the next phase, and to encourage the interviewee to continue. She *never* gives direction. Particularly for interventionist interviewers, this ‘minimalism’ is to begin with hard to bear and slow to learn.

In Sub-session Two, the interviewer selects particular cue-phrases she has written down, and asks further narrative questions about them. She can only ask about things already mentioned by the interviewee, only use the terms used by them, and must ask in the order in which they were raised. She can leave items out, but cannot add and cannot go back. Except tactically, she only asks for more narrative detail about events that happened (inner world thoughts and feelings, outer-world actions and events).

On the items she does raise, she pushes for detailed and ‘felt’ accounts of particular incidents: this is called ‘Pushing for/towards PINs’ (PIN= Particular Incident Narratives). This can involve several ‘rounds’ of questioning.

The third Sub-session is not always necessary. If it takes place, this happens after the material of the first two sub-sessions has been thought about and considered. It may or may not involve further narrative questioning under BNIM rules. It is governed by the interviewer’s concerns.

Interpretation. BNIM has a default method of interpretation that typically results in a History of the Case Evolution (HCE). This History brings together an understanding in the objective and subjective turning-points and continuities of the person under discussion.

The structure of the first two sub-sessions ensure that –after the initial open-narrative question has been posed – that the interviewee is pushed to tell their whole story any way they like, that they are only invited to tell more narrative detail about items that

³ A Short Guide and Detailed Manual of BNIM (an open-narrative biographical method) is available free on request (Wengraf 2013)

they themselves have raised. To the extent to which PINs are generated about past incidents, as well as evidence of the present perspectives embodied in the telling of the told story the transcript is also likely to provide evidence of past situations and past perspectives as embodied in the PINs.

The protocols of **BNIM interpretation** are different from many others. I shall try to show that they involve an approach which is profoundly historical (of actors and societal contexts and processes) and action-oriented, one which we hope to show feeds well into the emergent ‘psycho-societal’ model previously discussed. As before, only a simplified model can be presented here.

1. The transcript is the relatively raw data. From it, two different sets of ‘processed data’ are derived: the ‘living of the lived life’ set and the ‘telling of the told story’ set. These are first interpreted quite separately (in each case, starting with a 3-hour panel session) and, after further work by the researcher, the results are brought together in a case account, often in a history of the case.

The ‘told story’ is a persuasive exercise. BNIM methodology enables the following question to be considered and faced fully: *Why did a person who lives his life like X come to tell his story as Y?*

E.g. *Why did a man whose lived life shows a track of lack of courage tell a story presenting himself as a man of great courage? Does he show courage in the telling of his story which is apparently missing from our understanding of the life?*

2. The ‘living of the lived life’ set is based on the relatively ‘objective data’ of the person’s whole life or period in question (the Biographical Data Chronology, BCD).

Thus from an assertion in the transcript “*Forced to leave school at 16 because my parents made me*”, the ‘objective data’ set would retain ‘left school at 16’ as a candidate for the BDC. The assertion as a whole “*Forced.. because my parents made me*” would be kept for the second set of data.

A BDC is constructed, each ‘item’ being considered as a chunk. A BDC might have ten or twenty such ‘dated’ chunks.

3. This BDC is then used as a basis for a ‘blind’ panel of approximately 4-6 people. Each chunk, starting with the earliest, is presented to the panel which is ‘future-blind’: all (except the facilitator) don’t know what happens next in the living of the lived life. The panel is asked to generate hypotheses and counter-hypotheses about what this might have meant for the somebody in question (their experiencing of it) and what might have happened later in the lived life if this experiencing-hypothesis was true. These are recorded. The next chunk is then put up... and the procedure continues normally for some 3 hours or so.

‘Structural hypotheses’ start being derived about the pattern shown by the record: for example, a pattern of ‘exclusion’. How was the life lived, and why might it have been lived that way, and not in another.

4. The transcript is also processed into a set of ‘chunks’ recording the sequence of the ‘telling of the told story’ through the two subsessions (especially the first). The chunks start with the initial SQUIN – a Single *Q*uestion aimed at *I*nducing *N*arrative -- and go on to the end of the transcript. A new ‘chunk’ is said to start when either (i) a new speaker starts talking, (ii) the topic changes, or (iii) the textsort, the way a topic is being talked about, changes. [For example, the topic might continue, but the speaker might shift from distanced Report, to heart-felt PIN, and then to violent Argument].

5. This sequentialisation of the transcript ‘chunks’ is then used as the basis of another BNIM panel, this concerned with the ‘telling of the told story’. Again, the panel is future-blind, knows nothing of the real lived life explored by the panel along the first track, and multiplies its hypotheses about the ‘experiencing’ of the person telling the story, and with hypotheses about what they might say in next ofr following ‘told story chunks’. Again, hypotheses and counter-hypotheses about the experiencing story-teller as they decide to move from topic to topic and textsort to textsort , are all recorded. These provide the basis for emergent ‘structural hypotheses about the telling’: how was the story told and why was that story told in that way, and not in another?⁴

6. On the basis of these two tracks (the 3-hour panels are there to broaden the imagination of the lone researcher), the researcher develops a sense of the sort of situated subjectivity that lived the pattern of the lived life and the sort of subjectivity that spoke the pattern of the telling of the told story.

7. These separate provisional conclusions from the two interpretive tracks enable the question to be posed: *Why did a person who lived their life like X come in the interview to tell their story like Y?*

8. At this deliberately-delayed point of integrating the two tracks, a model of that particular historically-situated subjectivity over the period in question and up to and including the point at which the interview happened needs to be constructed, a model which makes sense of the evolution of the lived life and the moment of the telling of the told story.

9. The chunk-by-chunk future-blind approach to the historical actor (‘agent’) in his or her lived life requires the panel and the researcher to ‘join the predicament’ of all historical actors of not-knowing-the-future but having to do or not-do something at each moment. This simulation of the ‘predicament of the future-ignorant actor’ over the relatively long period of the ‘lived life’ (or specified period) occurs also in the micro-historical moment of the ‘performed interview’. The lived life might be 30 years and the lived interview only 3 hours, but in both cases the interviewee is a historical actor making decisions throughout the short history of the interview(to act, to not-act; to talk, to not talk, or to talk otherwise) which give us strong clues about the continuities and mutations of the situation and the historically-situated subjectivity.

⁴ For detail on the working of BNIM panels, see Wengraf 2001: 255-80 and Wengraf 2011a: section 3.2.4.

10. The model that integrates the two tracks into a relatively unified concept of the historically-situated subjectivity often takes the form of a History of the Case Evolution (HCE). This often shows phases in the ‘mutation’ of situations, subjectivity and perspectives over the period of the case, not always ones recognised by the interviewee themselves.

Assuming that “biographic narrative expression” is expressive both of conscious concerns and also of unconscious cultural, societal and individual presuppositions and processes, BNIM supports research into the complexities of the lived experience of individuals and collectives, and their transmission over time.

It facilitates understanding both the ‘inner’ and the ‘outer’ worlds of ‘historically-evolving persons in historically-evolving situations’, and particularly *the interactivity and mutual-constitutiveness* of such inner and outer world dynamics.

Seeing its interviewee as a ‘historical actor/subjectivity in a dated and located situation’, BNIM’s twin-track methodology gives the researcher (through the chunk-by-chunk future-blind procedure) no option but to reconstruct the actor’s successive life-living and story-telling predicaments and the meaning of the selection-decisions of options taken and not taken.

Promoting ‘agency’ through psycho-societal research using BNIM

In this third part of the chapter, we consider the promotion of ‘agency’ as a historical variable) in two forms:

1. in a study of a Healthy Living Centre in East London (Bromley-by-Bow) which used a large range of psycho-societal methods of data collection and which was explicitly reporting on the extent to which and how the Centre promoted the ‘agency’ of the population it was serving.
2. in a note on how the ‘practice of BNIM research’ itself promotes reflexivity and agency for the researchers and the interviewees.

Study of agency using BNIM plus other methods (‘BNIM-plus’)

BNIM was first ‘disseminated’ in 2001 through a textbook with two BNIM chapters (Wengraf 2001). Since then a growing number of doctoral and postdoctoral and studies using BNIM have been produced (see Wengraf 2013 for details and a BNIM-bibliography). An accessible source of studies from an EU-funded BNIM project is Chamberlayne et al (2002), primarily case-comparative chapters, with appendices on method, and a study of some ‘agentic’ institutions in Europe.

Here, we summarise one such study (Froggett et al 2005), of an agency-promoting innovative institution, the Bromley by Bow Healthy Living Centre (founded in 1981).⁵ The study featured a research team from a number of different professional and academic disciplines, a wider-than-usual combination of research methods, and an emergent psycho-societal conceptual approach.

(i) The research team consisted of Froggett, a psycho-analytically trained social-worker with extensive experience in the education of health and social care professionals and in psychodynamically-informed group facilitation and observation; Chamberlayne, a sociologist and social policy expert with particular interest in the structures and cultures of social care and social mobilisation; Buckner, a more statistically-minded social geographer interested in social mapping and ethnography; and Wengraf, historian turned sociologist, turned Contemporary Cultural Studies researcher, interested in social research methodology and understanding the working of institutions in context.⁶

(ii) The range of data-gathering methods used by the team in their 3-year research can be gathered from our summary:

We are convinced that the multiplicity of observers and conversation partners ... and the process of team interpretation of all the experiences and observations made, has enabled a strong triangulation which no single observer doing their own interpretation could have achieved.....Overall, we triangulated data from the following sources:

- Specific claims made by interviewees that related to their experiences, their creative life and their interpersonal relationships within the Centre. These claims represent both reality and ideal in that they involve accounts of individual experience and a vision of the Centre as a community
- Further information on experience, creativity and relationships from our detailed interpretation of interview texts
- Observations of interpersonal and organisational processes through formal meetings and observation of the Centre's day-to-day activities and interactions
- The participation in the Development Group process as a reflective experience of how people think about their work, how ideas emerge and how they get put into practice
- Consideration of the ways in which themes relating to biographies and processes were encoded within the organisational myths and stories
- Documentation from Centre and other files both statistical and other

⁵ This is an arts-based Healthy Living centre, Child's centre and Community centre in the Borough of Tower Hamlets in the East End of London.

⁶ We did not have anybody with accounting and financial-manager expertise on our research team to know what business and financial data to look for and to evaluate what we did have access to. We thus accessed the internal-culture of the organisation, but to my mind failed to locate it properly in macro-societal context. The formal aim of the research, it should be said, was very focused on intra-institutional work with older people in the institution, which (only partly) explains our failure to attend sufficiently to macro-societal context.

(Froggett et al 2005: 40 *last bullet point added TW*)

They go on to remark:

Our original strong focus on biographic narrative has been complemented – largely as a result of our learning from the Development Group – by a much greater attention to art. This has led to finding parallels between ‘syncretistic thinking’ in the Centre and in our method of free associative synthesising during processes of interpretation. Our ‘psychology of inner worlds’ has become increasingly informed by psychodynamic concepts. Our ‘sociology of outer worlds’ in this study is primarily informed by an increasingly ‘ethnographic eye’ for the detail of what people do and how they relate in institutions, their routine practices and their unexpected crises. This is supplemented by analysis of existing information gathered in statistical studies....(Froggett et al 2005:41) ⁷

(iii) To sum up something about the configuration of concepts that came to characterise our thinking, some are embedded in the following assessment:

The Centre model, therefore, combines a potentially abrasive entrepreneurship ready to use non-local contacts and vertical partners needed to establish the Centre as a weighty local player on its own terms with significant partnerships with local and regional partners. It involves insisting on terms that do not compromise the type of new culture that the Centre struggles to embody.

The Centre’s success so far as a community enterprise is, we think, at least partly due to its capacity to keep the different components of what we have also called a social co-entrepreneurship model in a workable state of creative tension; to have intuitively developed a systemic culture on the basis of a philosophy of whole persons and integrated whole systems; and to have developed individual leaders, managers and staff who are capable of integrating the three strands in themselves.

The three strands are (i) external promotion and networking; (ii) fund-raising and social business activities, and sound internal financial management; and (iii) the focus on growing an internal culture which remains true to the Centre’s social mission and offers protected encouragement of agency and initiative-taking (Froggett et al 2005: 97)

The Bromley-by-Bow study was concerned explicitly with an organisation that purported to have a regime that promoted the ‘agency’ of its staff and its user population. It had an unusually-broadly-trained research team and used an unusually-broad set of data-gathering methods. Explicitly psycho-societal, it started with the practice of BNIM interviewing and interpretation, and what we came to call the ‘free-associative panel’ that characterised its procedure of data-interpretation. ⁸

⁷ A caveat. From the point of view of a full-spectrum method for a full psycho-societal concept of regime, the ‘political economy of the external regime’ (the national funding regime and the requirements, incentives, and disincentives of the national and local government context) was not properly explored..... Partly this was inevitable, given the focus of the funded research project on the ‘internal regime’ of ‘integrated practice – focus on older people’. In addition, (a) we did not think of asking for access to the Centre’s accounts and financial managers until very late; (b) we found unexpected resistance when we did try; (c) we had nobody on the team with relevant expertise.

⁸ The BNIM panel is based on free-associative thinking and hypothesising around a particular chunk; the free-associative panel of the Bromley-by-Bow research team had no such defined focus. We cannot go into these details here.

BNIM process and ‘historically-situated subjectivity’

‘Agency’ and ‘reflexive deliberation’ is also fostered by the BNIM rules in two ways: (i) in the interview, (ii) in the multi-stage BNIM interpretation process.

1. In the BNIM interview, the protocols foster a sense of ‘agency’ in the interviewee, and a capacity for ‘silent reflexivity and deliberated disciplined response’ in the interviewer.

In sub-session 1, the interviewee is free to develop their story free from any fear of interruption or interrogation or ‘authoritative guidance’ from the interviewer. This security enables a process of ‘internal elaboration’ to be fostered and encouraged. As regards the interviewer, the obligation to facilitate but not to interrupt relieves the interviewer of an obligation or right to intervene and direct and take charge. This creates the space where the power of ‘attentive silent listening and reflection’ is fostered.

In sub-session 2, the pushing for PINs encourages the interviewee to explore their own history more fully, so that long-forgotten episodes and details very often are retrieved to the interviewee’s excitement. This greater contact with earlier emotional lived experience is in itself a source of agency.

2. In the BNIM interpretation panel, a capacity for ‘imaginative realism’ is released in both individual panel members and in the group by the group procedure. Freed from the obligation to be individually correct, and allowed free expression of intuition and imagination in the equivalent of a corporate ‘brainstorming session’, people discover aspects and depths which are surprising and competence-enhancing.

3. More generally, in the complex twin-track procedures leading to provisional identifications of the patterns of the living of the lived life and the telling of the told story, the insistence on provisionality also relieves the researcher from the burden of having to be ‘quickly correct’; the insistence on the building-up of limited partial syntheses before moving to the ‘case account’ and the ‘History of the Case Evolution’ does the same. In John Keats’s terms of 1817, the component of individual and collective agency being fostered is one of a ‘negative capability’ which he defined as the capacity to tolerate “being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason (Keats 2002: 41)”.

I have tried to show how a particular organisation (the Bromley by Bow Centre) that attempts to foster individual and collective agency can itself be a ‘collective agent’. I have indicated how such innovative practice can be explored by a collective of differently-trained researchers (partly co-researching with staff and users) extending the range of data-collection methods (conversation, observation, documentation, participant action research) and integrating data-interpretation procedures to a serious extent. I have tried to show how the detail of BNIM procedures can itself contribute to the fostering of agency among interviewers and interviewees.

Conclusion

In the first part of this paper, I argued for the limitations of a one-sidedly social or sociological application of Critical Realism that produced no version -- or a cardboard version, unconvincing to professionals of depth psychology -- of the complexities of the 'inner world' (Archer and Oltman I argued that a weak version of the 'immediately social' in the programme of Hollway had no version -- or a cardboard version unconvincing to professional macro-sociologists -- of the macro 'societal' outer-world . I argued, therefore, for an explicitly 'psycho-societal' concept of research. This would involve a more sustained and complex exploration of human psychology, individual and collective, than Archer's approach requires, and a more sustained and complex exploration of historical societal realities than the study of the 'immediate psycho-social' seems to suggest.

In respect of 'inner' and 'outer' worlds and their regimes, I argued against Hoggett's over-strong ontological/epistemological separation account and commended that of Froggett's four-level or four-domain map. Finally, as regards the concept of 'agency', I argued for a historically- variable set of four sources, both individual and group in origin.

In the second part of the paper, I discussed the concept of a full-spectrum methodology of data-collection for a fully psycho-societal research programme, one that included interviews and observation. I then gave a summary of BNIM as one mode of interviewing and interpretation within such a full-spectrum methodology.

In the third section, I gave an example of methodology and concepts in play in one agency-promoting study of an agency-promoting agency (Bromley by Bow Centre). I also tried to bring out how some of the micro-practices (especially open-narrative interviews and future-blind panel interpretation) of BNIM interpretation themselves promote aspects of agency.

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