

## Reflective-verbal language and reverie in a qualitative interview

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### Abstract

*Background:* in contrast to dominant approaches to therapy research that look at outcomes and focus on large samples, another primary strand of research considers microphenomenal processes and focuses on small samples. This paper contributes to the latter genre in regard to the implicit impact of language. *Aim:* this paper aims to apply relational psychotherapeutic thinking about empathic dialogue, specifically the concepts of reflective-verbal language and reverie, to qualitative interviewing. *Methodology:* an example from a small-scale study about emotionally-evocative language is reviewed in detail, focusing on the interviewer's phenomenological experience of her conversation with a participant in a qualitative interview. *Findings:* the authors argue that the interviewer's reflexive awareness of her reveries and the reflective-verbal nature of the research dialogue, gave her an alternative perspective on the participant's (and her own) experience. *Implications:* the paper highlights the value within research and practice of maintaining awareness of language at a microphenomenal level, using techniques based on the principles of psychological therapy.

*Keywords:* interviews; reflective-verbal language; reflexivity; reverie.

### Introduction

This paper contributes to the body of intersubjective and relational psychotherapeutic knowledge which dates from 1983 with the publication of Greenberg and Mitchell's (1983) *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory* and the subsequent advent of the so-called relational turn in psychotherapy (Mitchell, 1988). This tradition challenges the traditional blank screen of analytic psychotherapy, and examines the microphenomena of clinical practice not only from the point of view of the client and the therapeutic relationship but also from the intentions, experiences and actions of the therapist. Put differently, it looks at the way in which the subjectivities of client and therapist are

engaged in a dynamic process of interaction. In this article the relational approach is used to inform qualitative research interviewing methods.

Several aspects of the therapist's engagement and involvement in therapeutic process have been identified in the literature. First, it has been suggested that therapists can become more aware of the impact of client work on themselves (Bollas, 1999; Lees, 2001) by attending to their own musings, as both a debriefing in the light of sometimes challenging experiences and an opportunity for understanding clinical phenomena. Second, the role of both therapist and client in observing the therapeutic relationship has been highlighted (Aron, 1991/1999; Casement, 1985; Hoffmann, 1983); where 'the patient is selectively attentive to certain facets of the therapist's behaviour and personality' (Hoffmann, 1983, p.46), including the therapist's misdemeanours (Slochower, 2012). Third, there is increasing recognition that the therapist's reveries can offer insight into the clinical process (Ferro, 2015; Ogden, 1999). Reflecting these aspects<sup>1</sup>, an approach to research is developing which incorporates psychotherapeutic skills, and views researcher and participant as embodied actors in the research process, like the relational therapist and client (Macaskie and Lees, 2011; Macaskie, Lees and Freshwater, 2015; Nolan, 2015; McVey, Lees & Nolan, 2015).

This paper contributes to that emerging research genre, particularly in regard to the role of language and reverie in research. It begins with a selective review of the

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<sup>1</sup> This paper's approach towards research is underpinned, too, by feminist writing, such as Butler's (1990) contributions to the philosophy of gendered language; and Benjamin's (2004) and Orange's (2002, 2010, 2011) work on phenomenology, intersubjectivity and relational psychoanalysis.

extensive literature on the implicit impact of language in therapy, before going on to consider the subjective and intersubjective effects of language in a research interview.

### **Literature review**

Language can be used explicitly to describe, analyse and interpret. Its explicit capacity has been acknowledged in the psychotherapeutic literature ever since Freud (1915/1949) linked words to conscious awareness and proposed that ‘verbal ideas’ (p.133-134) transform unconscious primary process into preconscious-conscious secondary process. Other writers, however, have highlighted the implicit dimension of language: its capacity to *evoke* affective experience directly and immediately, not merely to describe or explain it afterwards. Merleau-Ponty, a phenomenologist and philosopher of language, puts it like this: ‘words, vowels and phonemes are so many ways of “singing” the world... they extract, and literally express, their emotional essence’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p.187). Bachelard focuses on the way words evoke daydreams or reveries which revive the past within us, uniting memory and imagination, mind and soul, such that ‘a single word is the germ of a dream... we find ourselves experiencing in words, on the inside of words, secret movements of our own’ (Bachelard, 1958/1994, p.147). All words have this implicit potential, according to Bachelard, just as all words can also be used more explicitly, depending on context and the associational links that accumulate within them. Vygotsky (1934/1986), a developmental psychologist, refers to the implicit aspect of words as their sense<sup>2</sup>; their

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<sup>2</sup>Vygotsky’s use of ‘sense’ is distinct from Frege’s (1892/1997) perhaps more famous use of the same term, where it has a more universal and objective meaning, but it is similar to Frege’s concept of the subjective ‘idea’ within a word.

subjective meaning, the sum of the affective experiences and contexts associated with them from infancy to the present time.

Many psychotherapeutic writers have studied the affective sense of words. Loewald (1978/1980), for example, claimed that thing- and word-presentations must be associated from earliest infancy at the unconscious level of primary process, if they are to merge subsequently and produce secondary process mentation. This association begins in the preverbal period, when sights, feelings and sounds, including parents' speech, are perceived by the infant as part of one global experience. According to Loewald, speech bonds with those other elements at this stage to produce a potential within language that endures throughout life, which he called 'evocative-magical' (p.186): 'We are dealing then with words, not insofar as they refer to or are linked with things, but as embodying and summoning things and experiences, as bringing them to life' (Loewald, 1978/1980, p.200). Exploring this evocative-magical aspect of language with clients can offer access to the emotional experiences such language encapsulates: Seiden (2009), for example, writes movingly about an analysand who is able to connect with his grief about his adult daughter's death only when he refers to her as his 'meidlele' (a Yiddish word, meaning 'baby girl'), as he did when she was little. Speaking that old, sweet word, he re-experiences viscerally his hope and love for her as a child, and breaks down into tears. Such experiential use of words, Gendlin (1962) claims, can connect us to our embodied experience in the moment, enabling us to pin down fleeting feelings and explore them.

Relational psychoanalytic writers have paid close attention to the two-person interaction of meaning and affective sense in therapeutic dialogue, in which language both generates and reflects the shared experience of the analytic pair (Ogden, 1999). The generative role that language plays is intensified when the therapist uses a form of ‘dramatic speech’ (p.13), which is intimate, vague and metaphorical. Ogden (1999) claims that such speech can communicate unconscious experience and emotion and he uses it to construct with his analysands a new, shared language, redolent with co-created meaning. His wakeful, associative day-dreaming or reverie is essential to this process.

Some implicit forms of being and knowing, however, are rarely verbalised and might appear to be outside the domain of language. These forms include our basic, often unspoken understandings of how to be with each other; our ‘implicit relational knowing’ (Boston Change Process Study Group/BCPSG, 2010). Yet it has been argued that a dimension of language, known as ‘reflective-verbal’ (Boston Change Process Study Group/BCPSG, 2010, p.162), arises from and participates in this implicit relational process at the split-second, ‘local’ (Boston Change Process Study Group/BCPSG, 2010, p.78) level of two-person interaction, as in the spontaneous, inexact but creative linking of words with images, gestures and feelings in therapy; ‘the “kinesics” of the interaction... (that) shift the affective state, in relation to the other. These might be called “mentalised kinesics”’ (Boston Change Process Study Group/BCPSG, 2010, p.81). Whilst this negotiation can be experienced as implicit to the interaction, it is ‘mediated through verbal exchange’ (Boston Change Process Study Group/BCPSG, 2010, p.81). Reflective-verbal experience, according to the BCPSG (2010), does not necessarily entail reflecting consciously on an issue using words;

rather, a verbal exchange is reflective when it involves reflecting back or re-experiencing implicit relational meaning in a new context, in such a way that the original meaning is reorganised.

### **Examples of reflective-verbal talk from a qualitative research interview**

We now review some examples of language in a research interview that illustrate aspects of the implicit, affective sense of language and the ‘reflective-verbal’ domain, drawn from a small-scale exploratory study into therapy clients’ experiences of emotionally-evocative language (McVey, 2013). The researcher (and first author), a practising counsellor, interviewed participants who were not her own clients. The participant from whose interview we quote below was a trainee therapist undertaking personal therapy in a relational, integrative modality. She gave informed consent for the interview and, specifically, for its use in this article, including analysis by the researcher and the second and third authors, who are her academic supervisors and also practice as counsellors.

The interview was video-recorded to include, as far as possible (given that all recordings, including video, are selective), both verbal and nonverbal aspects of their interaction. We used the transcription conventions of conversation analysis to transcribe the interview (Appendix 1 explains the transcription symbols). Non- and paraverbal features like pauses and overlaps in speech, to which conversation analysis pays great attention, are often omitted from reports of research and psychotherapeutic conversations but they are included here, because we want to study the rhythm and tone of the dialogue. Grotstein (2005) suggests that such features are fundamental to the

empathic communication process, ‘nudging’ (p. 1059) the listener towards attuned responses.

The interviewer recorded her own experiencing in the interview when she was transcribing the video-recording within a week or so of the meeting, in exploratory notes alongside the associated transcript passages; a method used in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) to ground analysis in the lived experience of the interview. She also reviewed extracts from the video-recording with the third author, to obtain another perspective.

The example of emotionally-evocative language from her personal therapy that the participant (P) chose to discuss in the interview came from her ninth session with her therapist. In that session her therapist had said: ‘You felt like you were never really listened to’. P explained that she had gone to the session intending to discuss a recent disagreement with a family member, but her therapist’s words had taken her back, unexpectedly, to a time as a teenager when she had felt unheard. She said in the research interview that the words helped her to feel accepted now, and thus more able to accept what had happened in the past. We are not going to focus on the therapist’s words, however, but on the interaction between P and the researcher (R) in the research interview, in order to explore the moment-by-moment unfolding of their dialogue and to consider its implicit, reflective-verbal aspects and their effects. We begin with an example that occurred about five minutes into the interview, when P was talking about her reaction to her therapist’s words. The extract demonstrates how P and R gradually

opened up the interactional space and became increasingly connected. We present their interaction in three steps, each of which followed immediately after the other.

### *Opening the space*

P: Erm (1.0) and it was just, erm (3.0) yeah, I suppose I felt like I could sort of (4.0) *accept* the situation a bit more, [erm]

R: [Mm?]

P: and I could sort of *look* differently at *my* (2.0) my role within it, my feelings, you know I didn't feel that (1.0) that they were unreasonable or I was over-reacting or anything like that, erm (2.0) so yeah it was erm (2.0) it was, as I say it was *cathartic* ((scratches her head)) and it was quite, it was quite, sort of *calming* afterwards, [after the initial emotion]

R: [M::m↑ Mm↓]

P: it was, [erm]

R: \*Yeah\*

Until this point in the interview, R (the researcher) had felt nervous and guarded and she suspected the participant felt unsettled too. Prior to this extract, their dialogue was fairly rapid, with few pauses, and P frequently used the term 'sort of', as if qualifying what she was saying.

Although P continued to use qualifying terms like 'sort of' and 'quite' in this short interaction, a different feeling began to filter into the conversation between P and R at this point too; perhaps as a function of their intersubjectively-shared implicit

relational knowing (BCPSG, 2010). When they began to discuss the effect on P of her therapist's comment, they slowed down, and made space for the longest pauses in their conversation so far (pause length is shown in brackets). In ordinary conversations pauses often indicate the end of a turn in talk and tend to be brief, around 200 milliseconds generally (Finset, 2014), but in forms of conversation like therapeutic and research dialogues, longer pauses are more commonly found: here, there are pauses of 2-4 seconds. Pauses can express uncertainty and disengagement or, conversely, they can make space for listening, reflection and finding the right words to communicate inner experience (Levitt, 2001). Parsons (2007) talks about such 'listening' pauses when he describes the poet Seamus Heaney's reaction to reading *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot: 'instead of studying [the poem] he began simply to listen to it, to make himself, as he puts it, "an echo-chamber for the poem's sounds"' (p.1446).

P's pauses may have expressed diffidence or even discomfort, but the fact that she followed them with insightful comments suggests that they also functioned as spaces to think and feel. R respected her need for space by letting pauses stand, and sometimes murmuring 'mm' and 'yeah' under her talk. Utterances like 'mm' at pause points can mean 'I'm listening: carry on' (Sacks, 1992), allowing the conversation to flow on over pauses. For R, these utterances also functioned to counter P's uncertainty with her own sense of engagement. There is something almost maternal about the sing-song, drawn out intonation of R's 'M::m↑Mm↓' towards the end of the extract, followed by a soft 'yeah'. These expressions seem to echo in tone the calmness P felt in response to her therapist's words. Elements of what the BCPSG might call 'reflective' process – here, reflections of P's feelings of acceptance and catharsis with her therapist,

elicited by being listened to—seem to be building up in the verbal and para-/non-verbal exchange, which was starting to function as an ‘echo-chamber’ for them. Yet as P voiced these feelings, she scratched her head. This gesture may have no implicit meaning whatsoever, but we note that its firm physicality contrasts with the calm catharsis she described.

### *Consolidating the space*

P: It, it felt like things had sort of been (4.0) *wrapped up a bit* ((left hand moves up and down, then around)) or, or you know, [sort of]

R: [Mm].

P: (2.0) dealt with more ((clutching hand gesture)) and I could sort of, you know, think about putting it to bed ((wide back and forth movement with left hand, fingers splayed, jerky)), and, and maybe moving on, it’s sort of (1.0)

P introduced a new linguistic feature -a sequence of idioms -to convey how her therapist’s words helped her to process her previous sense of not being heard. It felt like the matter had been ‘wrapped up’ and she could think about ‘putting it to bed’. Idioms like these are commonly used in business contexts to signify resolution of an issue and R might have interpreted them in this way too, especially since the metaphoric gestures (McNeill, 1992) that accompanied them appeared rather business-like (they had a firm, no-nonsense quality, like the earlier head-scratch). But R did not interpret them in this way because at this precise point P’s language and presence evoked in her a very different experience, with much gentler associations.

P's language reflected back to R a memory of being 'wrapped up' and 'put to bed' as a child, when she would fall asleep with the bedroom dimly lit by the light in the hallway. As P said 'wrapped up a bit', the *whole sense* of being in bed, aged perhaps seven or eight, came into R's consciousness very faintly in a way that amounted to a literal interpretation of P's idioms. The experience was partly visual: for a few milliseconds she 'saw' in her mind's eye the glowing darkness of her childhood bedroom, where the only light came through a crack in the door. It also had an emotional quality, evoking a feeling of tender intimacy associated with falling asleep as a child, and it hinted, too, at pathos for childhood bedtimes, now long-gone. Some authors conceive of such experiences as 'reveries' (Bion, 1962; Ferro, 2015; Ogden, 1999), which can not only reflect, but also transform the client's unprocessed mental contents. Arizmendi (2011) outlines the mental processes that generate empathic responses like these. As listeners tune into the verbal and nonverbal markers of emotion laid down by speakers (words, gestures, pauses etc.), they experience analogous feelings, narrowing the images available from memory to those approximately congruent with the prevailing emotion. Such images do not and cannot exactly mirror the contents of the speaker's mind, but they can represent an empathic translation of those contents.

We hypothesise that P's communications in this extract, including her business-like gestures and tentative verbalisations, acted as a trigger or ground for R's reverie. Instead of encouraging R to 'wrap up' her inner analysis of P's talk, as she might if she had paid attention only to its explicit content, the reverie gave R a different, implicit

perspective on P's intimate feeling of being listened to, and possibly onto the strength of her longing for it. The reverie offered a different perspective in another way too, in that it related to R's experience as a small child, several years younger than the teenager P was when she felt unheard; perhaps it connected to a time of greater safety for both of them (R, too, felt safer as a sleepy child than an anxious, adult researcher). We note, too, that during this exchange P twice used the phrase 'you know'. 'You know' is a common verbal device, sometimes used to include the other: here it may also have triggered and pointed, non-consciously, to the shared, implicit knowing developing between P and R.

#### *A creative space*

R: That's a really interesting phrase, that 'wrapped up'↑ ((makes circular stroking movement with right hand on left hand))

P: M::m↑ ((serious facial expression))

R: It sounds kind of (4.0) it sounds kind of cosy↑ ((smiles, cups both hands. P's facial expression softens)).

P: [Mm↑] ((smiles))

R: [You know] sort of covered up [and]

P: [Yeah!]

R: It feels quite *tender* ((both hands gesture downwards, then brings right hand to mouth, as if biting nails)), maybe that's (.) what I'm thinking.

P: (2.0) I suppose, wrapped up ((makes a cup with both hands, fingers splayed: like the cup R made earlier but bigger)), I'm, I'm sort of thinking, sort of being held maybe↑

R now interjected, saying ‘that’s a really interesting phrase...’, stroking her hand in a way that suggested a continuation of the gentleness that was building in the implicit relationship. Although R’s rising intonation and use of the words ‘really’ and ‘interesting’ invited engagement, P looked serious, as though concerned about what might come next. Ogden (1999) writes that he rarely communicates his reveries to his patients, but instead speaks from within the feeling they generate. In the same way, R related to P from the new feeling generated by her reverie, smiling and saying, after a 4 second pause in which she reflected on how to communicate her feeling: ‘It sounds kind of cosy↑’, with a questioning, rising intonation. As she spoke, she cupped her hands, as if to hold or contain something. This time P reflected back both the smile and the intonation (‘Mm↑’), and an attuned ‘dance’ ensued, with R mirroring P’s earlier words ‘you know’ and ‘sort of’; their speech overlapping in mutual eagerness. R found another fitting word: ‘tender’. Both speakers maintained the tentative note with words like ‘quite’ and ‘I suppose’ and R added to it with her gesture of nail-biting, but here their diffidence seems to have a collaborative quality, as if making space for development, which came in the form of P’s creative metaphor (expressed in their now shared, characteristically tentative manner): ‘I’m, I’m sort of thinking, sort of being held maybe↑’, accompanied by the ‘cup’ gesture on a larger scale.

The cup gesture gave physical form to P’s sense of being held by her therapist’s recognition and it may also have given form to the containing process unfolding between P and R in these extracts, encapsulated in R’s reverie. There is a strong link between reverie and containment. Bion (1962; 1967/1984) conceives of reverie as a

mental container for unprocessed feelings and sense-impressions, which can transform them into thinkable thoughts from which we can learn (Ogden, 2004). In the above exchange, the containing process helped P to think about her experience in a way that involved not only reflection but also creative transformation, illustrated in P's transformation of R's small cup gesture into a related, but more expansive movement.

## **Discussion**

The reverie or image that illuminated the participant's and researcher's words in the above extracts seemed to link them in a new way, by reflecting an aspect of the researcher's past experience into the joint context of their relationship and thereby enabling further exploration. We do not believe the researcher was being either particularly obtuse or insightful when she interpreted the participant's idioms literally; rather, P's words seemed to contain within them an implicit potential for such interpretation; a potential that was activated by their relationship and the interplay of their histories. The reverie changed the tenor of their relationship in the moment, giving the researcher a different, perhaps deeper perspective on the participant's experience. As a consequence, the participant was able to develop a novel metaphor that expressed her reaction to her therapist's words in a particularly apt and insightful way: 'sort of being held maybe'. It may have taken much longer to achieve this kind of insight in a more explicit discussion. It may not have been possible to achieve it at all.

Bucci (2011) notes the links between evocative, vivid language of this kind and episodic memory in the state of 'auto-noetic awareness' (p.263), whereby events are recalled with visceral immediacy, *as they were experienced*. In the presence of another

in a similar state of awareness, she suggests that a kind of ‘time travel’ (Bucci, 2011) can take place, not just to the past, but to an intersubjectively re-organised present. For the researcher who seeks to understand participants’ past experience and to make sense of this with participants in the present, there is much to be gained from awareness of such language and the implicit experiencing, like reverie, associated with it.

### **Implications for researchers**

We make the following tentative suggestions to assist fellow practitioners seeking alternative perspectives in research by attending to language and inner experiencing. First, the fleeting, implicit nature of inner experiencing can make it difficult to bring into awareness while it is happening or to remember afterwards, and it is easy to dismiss because it can seem mundane or irrelevant (Ogden, 1999). To address these challenges, we recommend that researchers aim, as far as possible, for balanced inner and outer listening, paying careful attention to what’s going on within themselves *and* what they observe in participants. We suggest that awareness and recall can be enhanced by video-recording rather than solely audio-recording interviews; making field notes about experiencing; reviewing recordings many times; and transcribing interviews shortly after they take place, aiming to include as many para- and nonverbal elements of expression as possible (the transcription conventions of conversation analysis can facilitate this process). We also recommend the practice, inspired by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith *et al.*, 2009), of making detailed exploratory notes that include the interviewer’s implicit responses, directly alongside the associated transcript passages.

Second, we believe that participants' feedback on interview interactions enrich investigations by providing further perspectives on the research relationship. In this study, all participants were invited to comment on draft findings, and 'P' was invited to comment specifically on a draft of this article. Our experience has been that some participants provide feedback, and others, like 'P' in this case, while expressing general support, do not make further detailed comments. We accept this state of affairs as a reflection of our participants' complex and busy realities. It is also likely to reflect limitations in our approach. Ultimately, however, the intricacy of relational interactions, like those in research interviews, means that all accounts are partial, no matter how carefully they are analysed nor how much feedback has informed them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). We do not believe this limitation invalidates such accounts, but it reminds us to be transparent in our claims about them. In this account, our analysis represents the intersubjectively grounded perspectives of the interviewer and her supervisors, and we do not claim it is 'the truth', either P's or a more universal truth. We continue to seek ways to expand and deepen our perspectives. A research study we are planning currently, for example, includes an opportunity for interviewer and participants to meet again after the initial interview to review together extracts from the video of that interview and share their understandings in person, informed by a video-review method known as 'Interpersonal Process Recall' (Kagan, Schauble, Resnikoff, Danish & Krathwohl, 1969; Macaskie et al., 2015). We hope this design will encourage further feedback from participants.

## **Conclusions**

There is growing interest in applying relational psychotherapeutic theories to qualitative research interviews, by taking into account the researcher's reveries and the precise form and impact of the language used in interviews (Holmes, 2013; McVey, Lees & Nolan, 2015). Although we do not claim that our findings, which arise from a single case within a small-scale qualitative study, can be generalised, we hope we have presented some ideas which may be of interest both to therapists and qualitative researchers as they attempt to understand their own and their clients'/participants' inner experiences and language, and which may stimulate further discussion. Ogden (1997) describes attentiveness to language in therapy as one of the great pleasures of being an analyst: we would add that it can be one of the great pleasures of being a researcher, too.

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### **Appendix 1: Transcription Symbols** (from Turnbull, 2003)

|                |  |
|----------------|--|
| (.)            | Pause of less than 1 second                                    |
| (1.0)          | Minimum countable pause (1 second)                             |
| ((sniff))      | Non-speech sounds and body language                            |
| Lo::ng         | Colons denote a drawn-out sound                                |
| word↑          | Rising intonation  |
| *soft*         | ** indicates speech noticeably quieter than surrounding speech |
| <i>italics</i> | italics for emphasis   |
| Over[lap]      | Square brackets denote start and finish of overlapping talk    |

### **Biographies**

**Lynn McVey** undertook the qualitative research outlined in this paper as part of a Masters in Psychotherapy and Counselling at the University of Leeds, where she is currently studying towards a PhD. She is a BACP-registered integrative therapist and her research interests include the interface between language, reverie and intersubjectivity, and approaches to practitioner-based research based on investigating the microphenomena of practice.

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**Greg Nolan** is Teaching Fellow in counselling and psychotherapy at the University of Leeds, BACP-accredited senior counsellor and registered counsellor/psychotherapist and fellow of the Higher Education Academy. He has a teaching career spanning over 40 years, the last 25 years additionally as a therapist, manager of counselling services and counselling training programmes, freelance counsellor, clinical supervisor and trainer; has research interests in phenomena in micro-moments of practice and clinical supervision; and has co-edited a book, published book chapters and peer-reviewed articles on therapeutic practice, clinical supervision and training.