



Empathy and Identification: Conceptual Resources for Feminist Fieldwork¹

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Abstract This paper introduces psychoanalytic conceptualisations of identification and empathy as ways of thinking about fieldwork interactions. I argue that these ideas have considerable relevance for feminist geography as resources for reflecting on relationships between researchers and those they research, especially in relation to debates about power and positionality in qualitative fieldwork. Drawing on object relations psychoanalysis, I describe identification in terms of unconscious processes of introjection and projection, which operate as dynamic exchanges within all interpersonal relationships. I draw attention to the scope for confusion between self and other in the context of these exchanges. This leads to a discussion of the concept of empathy, which I describe psychoanalytically in terms of receiving, processing, and making available unconscious material transferred from one person to another. I argue that empathy can be thought of as entailing an oscillation between observation and participation which creates psychic space or room to manoeuvre, and that it provides a way of understanding other people's experiences in the context of both similarities and differences between researchers and research subjects. I suggest that empathy is mobilised in many research relationships, and that its psychoanalytic conceptualisation provides a useful resource for understanding the dynamics of these relationships.

Introductory remarks

This paper returns to an issue familiar to many social researchers, namely the use of interpersonal relationships in the research process. I discuss some ideas from psychoanalytic thinking as resources for reflecting on fieldwork relationships negotiated in

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the course of feminist geography research. I focus specifically on the relevance of psychotherapeutic conceptualisations of identification and empathy in the context of qualitative interview methods.

Before proceeding to the main body of the paper, I have two preliminary points to make. First, feminist researchers in geography and other disciplines frequently address multiple audiences from multiple positions. For example, feminist geographers endeavour to communicate with geographers who take up a variety of positions in relation to different feminisms, with those outside as well as inside the discipline geography, and with activists as well as academics. In so doing, we draw on our own multiple positions and identities as geographers, feminists, academics, and much else besides. Negotiating such plurality presents us with numerous problems and dilemmas, including decisions about the “voice” we adopt in particular contexts, whether orally or in writing. My use of the first person plural here signals my sense of belonging within the category of “feminist geography”. However, the first person plural necessarily excludes as well as includes: it differentiates “us” from “not us”, whether “not us” is construed as “them” or “other” or something else. I imagine that readers will position themselves variously: included, excluded, elsewhere, affronted and so on. This positioning invokes processes of identification (identifying with) and dis-identification (identifying as “other than” or “against”), which are central to my concerns in this paper.

Secondly, feminist geography often seeks to go beyond limits prescribed by existing disciplinary traditions, but it also aims to engage in some kind of dialogue with these traditions with a view to influencing their development. In this paper I negotiate this tension in a particular way. My engagement with questions about interpersonal relationships in the research process is inspired largely by the efforts of feminist researchers who have argued long and hard for greater sensitivity towards those with whom we interact as researchers, and who, in so doing, have also problematised taken-for-granted features of such relationships (for early statements see Roberts, 1981; Stanley and Wise, 1983; Bell and Roberts, 1984). But my particular contribution invites researchers to draw on other kinds of resources, developed outwith² feminist scholarship, to think about such issues. The work of moving between different frames of reference – in this case those of feminist geography and psychoanalytic theory – also resonates with my core argument, in the sense that the concept of empathy refers to the capacity to understand the experiential frame of reference of another without losing an awareness of (its difference from) one’s own.

Negotiating research relationships: feminist perspectives

Feminist geographers have paid a great deal of attention to relations of power and questions of positionality in fieldwork (see for example England, 1994; McDowell, 1992; Rose, 1997), and have argued that the similarities and the differences between researchers and those they research require particular consideration (Valentine, 2002). When Ann

² “Outwith” is a word that highlights the geographical context from which I write. My spellchecker objects to it and many English dictionaries do not list it. However, it is used widely in Scotland to mean the opposite of “within”, the word “without” having acquired a different kind of meaning. I use “outwith” here as a modest assertion and acknowledgement of my own specific location within the social world about which I write.

Oakley (1981) described women interviewing women as a contradiction in terms, she suggested that the experiential similarities of female interviewers and interviewees, grounded in their shared gender position, foster mutual recognition and egalitarian interactions (also see Devault, 1990; Stanley and Wise, 1983). She thus asserted and valorised identification between feminist researchers and their female research subjects, claiming that feminist researchers recognise and identify with the gendered experiences embodied and articulated by their female interviewees. In this account, shared gender identity also provides the basis for empathy between researchers and research subjects, with the capacity of interviewers to understand and empathise with the experiences of interviewees emerging as a central feature of feminist research practice.

Subsequently, the dangers of assuming that gender similarity provides a basis for identification and empathy have been extensively discussed. Several commentators have argued that power-laden differences, for example of race, class, age, sexuality, dis/ablement, all have the potential to disrupt any possibility of identification between interviewer and interviewee (England, 1994; Gilbert, 1994; Kobayashi, 1994). Janet Finch (1984) has pointed out how, if interviewers assume commonalities and identification in the context of such differences, they are liable to reproduce structures of oppression and exploit research respondents. This has prompted some feminist geographers to advocate strategies in which differences between interviewers and interviewees are explicitly acknowledged and addressed (McDowell, 1992; Mattingly and Falconer Al-Hindi, 1995), while others have argued that, in some circumstances, differences between women researchers and their potential research subjects may be too significant and too sensitive to allow ethically acceptable research to proceed (England, 1994).

From this perspective, differences, and especially structural inequalities, between researchers and research subjects reduce the scope for identification, equality and empathy within interviews, sometimes to such an extent that research is rendered impossible. However, these analyses also tend to imply that it is possible to detect significant dimensions of difference before deciding whether and how to conduct feminist fieldwork. This assumption has been challenged. For example, J-K Gibson-Graham (1994) and Gillian Rose (1997) have argued that many salient aspects of the positions of researcher and researched cannot be brought into conscious awareness, thwarting attempts to disclose them effectively, and rendering such efforts no more than vain attempts to claim fuller knowledge than is possible. Unanticipated similarities and/or differences may become evident in the course of research, but what is more important is the inherent uncertainty of fieldwork. According to this perspective, interviewers and interviewees enter into each new encounter not knowing what will happen, including whether it will be possible to foster a relationship that is experienced as non-exploitative, or what scope (if any) there will be for identification and/or empathic understanding.

Feminist researchers in the field thus confront an array of questions and dilemmas. Can we enter into and sustain ethically acceptable research relationships with others, or are we always at risk of exploiting or damaging either others or ourselves? Can we simultaneously identify with, and recognise as different from ourselves, the others on whose experiences we draw? Should we seek to empathise with those we interview?

These questions are revisited again and again partly because particular contexts, and particular people matter: the issues at stake can never be fully resolved but reflecting on them helps to ensure the vitality of research practices. I would, however, also argue that

feminist geographers have so far neglected the potential insights to be drawn from the literature of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy in addressing these questions (but see Bingley 2002). In this paper I therefore draw on some of these resources, focusing on the relevance of psychotherapeutic conceptualisations of identification and empathy. I show how these concepts configure the spatiality of self-other relationships, and I point to the particular importance of empathy as a process that enables the creation of interpersonal and intrapsychic spaces in which similarities and differences can be mobilised, expressed and explored.

An important aside: on the purposes of psychotherapy and feminist research

I want to be very clear at the outset that I am not arguing for any blurring of the distinction between research practice and psychotherapeutic practice. This is a complex issue, and it is also one of the utmost ethical significance. While extended discussion lies beyond the scope of this paper, I comment briefly on one point of direct relevance to what takes place between interviewer and interviewee within research encounters, namely the different purposes to which research encounters and psychotherapy sessions are oriented.

The purpose of research relationships always includes the interest of the researcher in producing knowledge that can be communicated in contexts other than that of the research encounter, for example in seminars, reports, journal articles, and so on. Practitioners of psychotherapy share an interest in the production of knowledge, and one way of understanding psychotherapeutic work is in terms of making meaning or generating knowledge (Bollas, 1992, also see Bondi, 2003). But the form and ownership of knowledge generated in, and as the core purpose of, psychotherapy, differs from academic and intellectual knowledge production. In psychotherapy, the generation of knowledge is psychotherapeutic if and only if it enables the client (or service-user, or patient, or analysand) to make meaning. The priority accorded to the experience and ownership of knowledge generation by the person consulting the practitioner is a key feature that distinguishes psychotherapeutic practice from research practice. Of course, psychotherapists learn from those who consult them and may communicate the knowledge generated in other contexts. Conversely, research relationships may have effects that research respondents experience as beneficial and therapeutic. However, in both cases, these are side-effects rather than the core purpose of the encounters. Put another way researchers would surely be in breach of (implicit or explicit) codes of ethical conduct if they suggested that participation in research relationships would yield (or be likely to yield) therapeutic benefits, just as psychotherapists would breach the ethical frameworks guiding their work if they displaced their clients' capacity to make meaning with their own (Jones *et al.*, 2000).

It is in the context of this difference that I draw on psychoanalytic thinking. My aim is to provide conceptual resources for researchers to reflect upon our own experiences of conducting research (Hunt, 1989). I am not arguing for researchers to "do" different things within research relationships, and certainly not that research encounters should be made more "therapeutic". Rather I argue that understanding more about what takes place within research relationships may enrich our work in a variety of ways. Subtle shifts in research practice may ensue, but these are small changes and are not the aim of the approach I am advocating. I am more interested in fostering the capacity to reflect a little differently on what it is that we do, and what happens in, research relationships.

A psychoanalytic perspective on research relationships 1: identification, projection and introjection

Psychoanalytic theories provide ways of problematising distinctions between interior and exterior worlds (Zaretsky, 1997; Butler, 1999). In this paper I draw on the object relations tradition of psychoanalysis, within which psychic interiors are understood as richly peopled – filled with representations of selves and others and parts thereof³. The two words “object” and “relations” each signal core themes within this tradition. First, the object relations tradition chooses between a tension set up by a shift in Freud’s thinking from his earlier emphasis on drives or instincts to his later emphasis on unconscious relationality: object relations theory prioritises the need to relate, and argues that the aims of Freud’s well-known pleasure principle are always expressive of, and mediated by, this relational impulse (Fairbairn, 1952, 1994). Secondly, as a strand within psychoanalytic thinking, object relations theory accords priority to unconscious life. The word “object” refers to psychic representations of people and aspects of people, including one’s own, which exist in relation to one another within the unconscious. These interiorised unconscious relationships simultaneously mediate and animate our experiences of the world, including our relationships with others.

My particular focus here lies with the two interconnected concepts of identification and empathy. By differentiating between them I offer a perspective on subjective experiences within fieldwork relationships that is of particular relevance to understandings of similarities and differences between researchers and those with whom we conduct research. I argue that empathy provides space for difference, while also enabling the researcher to communicate respect and recognition. I develop my argument with reference to qualitative interviewing, but the same principles are potentially relevant to other qualitative approaches.

Psychoanalytically, identification is a process through which the psychoanalytic subject absorbs and incorporates aspects or attributes of others, metabolising this material to generate his or her own identity. Sometimes this happens consciously, for example when we perceive an equivalence or identity between our own and someone else’s experience. However, unconscious dimensions of identification are far more important, influencing the development of our personalities and our interactions with others in subtle and powerful ways that lie beyond our conscious awareness. For example, I might identify with my father, not as a conscious strategy in which I model myself on him, but unconsciously, by incorporating aspects of his way of being into my own. This might be expressed in a well-hidden but nevertheless fiercely competitive impulse in which my sense of agency depends on outperforming others, albeit outside of my conscious awareness.

The concept of identification has a rich and complex history within psychoanalytic theory, evolving from Sigmund Freud’s (1905, 1923) account of the acquisition of sexual identity in childhood, through the (post-Freudian) object relations tradition, within which Melanie Klein’s (1952) discussion has been particularly influential. For my purposes two

³ For introductory accounts of key traditions with psychoanalysis see entries on Freudian theory, object relations theory and Lacanian theory in McDowell and Sharp (1999, 98-101, 188-190, 143-145). For more extended treatments of the object relations tradition see for example Mitchell (1993) and Cushman (1995).

broad points are of particular importance. First, identification entails psychic exchanges that simultaneously produce and traverse boundaries between self and other (compare Sibley, 1995). In other words, identifying with another presupposes the separateness of self and other, but also suggests that the boundary between the psyches of self and other is permeable rather than impermeable (for example between myself and my father). Identification is therefore a concept that represents the spatiality of self and other in terms of flexible and open boundaries together with movement across those boundaries. Secondly, what is taken in, or introjected, is derived from experiences that are always suffused with unconscious fantasy, that is with a myriad of feelings and ideas necessarily beyond our capacity for conscious thought and reflection. In the example of my absorption of my father's distinctive form of competitiveness, my incorporation of something communicated by him takes place within the complex terrain of my unconscious, replete with an array of other significant representations of (aspects of) more and less significant others. I forge my own particular "style" of unconscious competitiveness within this context, one that may bear the impress of characteristics of his, but which is also personalised. Identifications are therefore always generative or transformative, rather than cloned copies of the attributes of others. Put another way, what we identify with is imagined as similar to ourselves but is always also different, and that act of imagination is always richly creative (see Bollas, 1989, 1992). As a key means through which unconscious material is incorporated within the self, processes of identification help to produce the spatiality of psychic interiors.

As Melanie Klein elaborated (see Mitchell, 1991), processes of identification also entail the unconscious expulsion, or projection, of unwanted psychic material, from oneself onto external others. The notion of projecting attributes onto others is a familiar one, perhaps one of the most common examples of the popularisation of psychoanalytic ideas. I might describe a colleague as highly competitive in contrast to myself, effectively disowning and externalising my own competitiveness, and perhaps this echoes my father's way of concealing his own competitiveness by projecting it onto others.

Introjective and projective processes are essential to our capacity to understand, at least to some degree, the peopled world in which we live. While Melanie Klein's work was formative in the development of these ideas in terms of unconscious, intra-psychic realities, within the object relations tradition D.W. Winnicott's (1965) work has been particularly influential in consideration of the interpersonal environment. As he elaborates, recognition, however partial, of our own feelings, and those of those of others, depends upon transactions between inner and outer worlds. Put another way, emotions are culturally presented rather than biologically given, and are therefore learnt from others, but emotions are also internally generated, that is incorporated and embodied, in ways that make it possible and meaningful to distinguish between what is faked and what is truly felt. Likewise, when we recognise how someone else feels, we are, in effect, projecting what we have felt onto another. We understand someone else's pent up rage or someone else's grief because we know what such things feels like, and therefore by imagining others to feel as we have felt.

When feminist researchers apply qualitative methods, we routinely use our own subjective experiences in such ways. We aim to understand important aspects of the experiential worlds of others using introjective and projective processes to imaginatively identify with them or as different from them. We do this temporarily, returning, as it were,

to our own experiential worlds in due course. However, we often feel changed in some way, and we might well feel concerned if we don't. This suggests that the intersubjective transactions I have described are rather more dynamic and relational than I have so far allowed.

Processes of introjection and projection do not *necessarily* affect the other person – material may be absorbed from or projected onto them, without bearing upon their own psychic experience. However, these processes often *are* highly interactive, with two or more people drawn into a kind of unconscious division of labour. Pursuing my example of unconscious competitiveness, I might project this onto others without affecting them, but equally others may find themselves drawn into an unconscious response. For example, depending on what is evoked within their own unconscious world of object relations, other people might be drawn into competition with me in straightforward, devious, enhancing or depleting ways. Alternatively they might feel as if they had already been defeated, unconscious responses that might be manifest in feelings of isolation, or of being undermined or thwarted.

Research interviews consciously and explicitly set up a division of labour in which one talks and another listens. Such talking and listening depends upon a myriad of cues, and I would suggest that a good deal of the communication takes place unconsciously and generates unconscious divisions of labour. For the interviewer, unconscious forms of interaction might be suggested by an apparently extraneous thought arriving unbidden, or by a particular emotional response to the interviewee. There is nothing mysterious about feeling sad when listening attentively to someone's account of personal loss, but it does depend on an intersubjective exchange: something of the inner reality of one person is not only communicated to another person, but is actively incorporated into the inner reality of that other person. Moreover, it is not unusual to be moved to anger when hearing about how someone else has been treated while the other person is not in the least bit enraged. Psychoanalytically, what may be happening between interviewer and interviewee is an unconscious process of projective identification, in which the interviewee cannot consciously experience his or her own anger and unconsciously projects it into a receptive other who keeps it available within the relationship (Klein, 1946).

The kind of exchanges I am describing are unexceptional, often enabling in the sense of facilitating social interactions, and cannot be avoided. But they do generate confusion about what belongs to, or comes from, whom, and about the similarities and differences between people (see for example Bollas, 1987, especially chapter 9; also see Casement, 1985). They also raise questions about what can be tolerated within relationships, in the sense of the participants being able to remain open to a range of unconscious exchanges, rather than keeping at bay important components of the unconscious reality of the other person (see Sibley, 1995). By identifying with the interviewee, the interviewer indicates recognition and understanding of the interviewee's experience. But the imaginative leap from one's own, to the other's, world, not only glosses over differences, it also leaves unquestioned unconscious exchanges like projective identification and the ensuing unconscious divisions of labour. If the interviewer cannot recognise the interviewee's experience at all, that is equally problematic. What is needed of the interviewer is the capacity to understand the interviewee's feelings while simultaneously staying in touch with the difference between the other person's feelings and his or her own. That might seem to be demanding the

impossible but in fact entails another rather ordinary experience, namely the capacity to empathise, to which I now turn.

A psychoanalytic perspective on research relationships 2: from identification to empathy

Empathy refers to a process in which one person imaginatively enters into the experiential world of an other. When another person empathises with us, and communicates that to us, we feel understood emotionally and experientially as well as cognitively. The term empathy is not very widely used within psychoanalytic writing, but it has been taken up by practitioners primarily through the influence, direct or indirect, of the humanistic psychotherapist Carl Rogers. For Rogers (1957) empathy is an essential component of effective psychotherapy, and he argued that clients need to feel understood emotionally as a precondition for therapeutic change. Rather than switching to Rogers' conceptual framework, I draw upon the writings of D.W. Winnicott (1965, 1971) to conceptualise empathy psychoanalytically. Winnicott's work is particularly useful for this task because of his emphasis on the close links between the interpersonal and the intrapsychic, and on the continuities between "ordinary" and psychotherapeutic relational processes.

For Winnicott (1965, 1971) psychotherapists echo good-enough early care-givers in their capacity to receive unconscious material from the other person, to process it, and to make it available in such a way that the other person can incorporate or "own" it, as opposed to repeating the cycle of expelling and disowning it. This may involve no more than the psychotherapist demonstrating that he or she is not damaged by, or frightened of, the unconscious material, which often takes the form of powerful emotions. For the psychotherapist this process begins with the introjection of aspects of the emotional experience of the other, or with being receptive to the other's projections, in much the same way as identification. But what is taken in is processed in order to be made available within the relationship in a different way. This is what distinguishes empathy from identification: it also includes the processing of, and the rendering available, unconscious communications. In Winnicott's (1967/1971, 137) words "by and large [psychotherapy] is a long-term giving the patient back what the patient brings".

While empathy is manifest and put to use in particular ways within psychotherapy, it operates in many other contexts too, including, for example, research interviews, in which there is often a tacit assumption that one of the tasks of the interviewer is to listen to the interviewee empathically. All going well, the interviewer is neither overwhelmed, nor untouched, by what the interviewee presents. Rather the material has an impact, which the interviewer is able to tolerate. Another way of describing this is to say that the interviewer is emotionally present, and allows the interviewee's material to trigger feelings, whether of sadness, joy, anger, fear, protectiveness, disgust or whatever. At the same time, the interviewer sustains the capacity to think about these responses, and is not incapacitated by them. This kind of processing calls upon the person receiving the material – the listener – to remain aware of the act of imagination required to recognise the other person's feelings, and therefore to remain alert to differences between self and other. It also requires the listener to stay in touch with their feelings and to reflect upon their feelings at (more or less) the same time.

While listening empathically to another person is an ordinary and everyday process, it is not necessarily easy to do. For example, suppose that during a research interview an interviewee begins to talk about a distressing incident and becomes very tearful. The interviewer might feel anxious about his or her capacity to respond appropriately, or fearful that he or she will become tearful too, or angry at being expected to witness the distress. If the interviewer is unconsciously overwhelmed by such feelings, he or she is likely to react to, rather than reflect on, what is going on. This might be manifest in the interviewer attempting to stop the interviewee from continuing the account, maybe by swiftly changing the subject, or by rushing to comfort the interviewee with a view to abating the tears. In such circumstances, unconscious identification may well be at work in a way that undermines the capacity of the interviewer to differentiate between the unconscious emotional experiences of self and other. The boundary between interviewer and interviewee has become deeply confused, and one of the effects is likely to be that the interviewee experiences a reduction in the intersubjective space available for his or her own self-expression.

If, however, the interviewer is able to tolerate the unconscious impact of the other person's distress, recognising that the anxiety, fear or anger belongs to his- or her-self, and the initial distress belongs to the interviewee, then something different can ensue, and empathy can be mobilised. Listening empathically, the interviewer seeks to understand what the incident felt like for the interviewee and to convey that understanding to him or her. The interviewer may identify with the interviewee in the sense of imaginatively taking the part of the interviewee within the incident, but without losing hold of the fact that this was the interviewee's experience rather than his or her own. Much of this work is likely to be done non-cognitively and non-verbally.

Imaginatively entering into another person's experiential world at the same time as retaining awareness of the difference between one's own unconscious experience and that of the other means being an observer of the process at the same time as being a participant. Rather than occupying the two positions simultaneously all of the time, what happens is more akin to an oscillation between observation and participation. This process of oscillation will probably be familiar to anyone who has conducted qualitative interviews. At moments the interviewer is likely to be fully absorbed by the interviewee's story and fully participating in the dynamic, intersubjective exchange, unconsciously as well as consciously, emotionally as well as cognitively. But such immersion is typically interspersed with moments of taking stock in a more detached way, that is of observing the relationship and the interview, as if somewhat apart from the immediate, unmediated, experience. In interviews where we lose all track of our explicit reason for being there – perhaps feeling that we are a confidante rather than a researcher – we have become too immersed to observe. We are very receptive to what is being communicated, maybe because we identify with the interviewee, or because we feel overwhelmed by something her or she has said, but we are unable to retain contact with the observer position in which to reflect upon what is happening. Conversely if we find ourselves unable to adapt our questions or our manner in response to the interviewee's cues, we probably haven't really been taking in what they have been saying, perhaps because we feel repelled by something about them, and the chances are that they will not feel well understood. In this event we have been unable to leave the observer position and to make ourselves more fully available to the interviewee.

The possibility of oscillating between positions of observation and participation within an interview creates what might be described as room for manoeuvre, or as a kind of psychic space in which affinities and similarities can be recognised, at the same time as retaining a sense of difference and distance. Empathy can be thought of in terms of psychic space in which movement between positions is possible. This space is one in which interviewees are able to express themselves relatively freely, and in which they may move beyond familiar and well-rehearsed accounts into spontaneous self-exploration. Of course, interviewers may need to limit the extent of self-exploration undertaken by interviewees, but the capacity to shift between immersion and reflection, or between participating and observing, creates space in which to manage the encounter openly and respectfully. I have ascribed this oscillation to the interviewer, and I would argue that it is a key task of the interviewer to make this kind of psychic space – empathy – available. However, what is likely to follow is a partnership in which the interviewee takes the interviewer's cues to engage in something similar, that is to both talk about, and actively reflect upon, his or her experience. When this happens, interviewees may comment that they haven't thought about their experiences in the same way before.

Conclusion

The conceptualisation of interview relationships advanced in this paper provides a way of thinking about power and positionality in feminist geography fieldwork, especially in relation to questions about similarities and differences. The positions of researchers and those they research are bound to differ in a multitude of ways, some of which may be obvious but others of which are likely to remain outside awareness. Responding to people empathically creates psychic and intersubjective spaces in which experiences of difference and similarity can be respected without necessarily being remarked upon or even consciously recognised.

As noted in the introduction to this paper, some feminist commentators have argued that researchers should disclose their positions and acknowledge the differences between themselves and those who become their research respondents, while others have argued that such disclosure is impossible because so much is contingent, unknown and/or outside our awareness. While I would agree with the latter view in the sense that many aspects of our identities and our interactions operate unconsciously, I have argued that the concepts like introjection and projection, empathy and identification, can help us to reflect more productively on the richness of research relationships, including their unconscious dimensions. This is not about rendering the unconscious conscious, but about reframing issues of similarities and differences in order to use our ordinary experiences more fully, especially in our reflections on fieldwork interactions.

Empathy does not expunge differences or inequalities. Rather, empathy enables people to engage in the work of communicating and understanding aspects of their experiences across a multiplicity of differences. The similarities on which we draw reside primarily in our diverse experiences of this kind of interpersonal work: we know unconsciously if not consciously what it is like to feel similar to and different from others. We do not know what aspects of such similarities and differences will be salient in any particular interaction. Viewed in this way, our capacity to use our own experiences of interacting with others in the context of a whole panoply of similarities and differences is probably as important as attending to the particularities of similarities and differences of

gender, class, race, age, sexuality and so on. As I have argued, empathy entails oscillating between participating in processes of (unconscious) identification, and remaining aware of – observing – some distinction (however fragile) between one's own and the other person's inner realities. This communicates (usually non-verbally and often unconsciously) respect for differences as well recognition of similarities, and it is this process that matters, enabling us to communicate (however falteringly) across differences we can easily name (such as gender) and many others of which we are not consciously aware.

By way of conclusion I want to emphasise that I have been attempting to describe in practices we all deploy in everyday interactions as well as in research relationships. I am not advocating a distinctive fieldwork practice. Instead, I have attempted to argue that the concept of empathy, and its psychoanalytic formulation in terms of introjecting and processing, feeling and thinking, or of participating and observing, is a useful way to reflect upon what happens in fieldwork relationships of all kinds.

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