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Qualitative Inquiry

**Locating a "socio-cultural" unconscious in psycho-social research**

There have been many usages of the concept of unconscious in tandem with an entity larger than the individual: group, cultural, social, collective – to name the most familiar. All in different ways have been subject to criticism, yet perhaps there remains some sort of pressing need for a conceptualisation of unconscious processes that are meta-individual. The binary thinking that has characterised social science seems to afflict these debates. A similar dilemma affects psycho-social research, which draws on a psychoanalytic epistemology (dialogue of unconsciousness, transference-counter transference, 'unthought known', learning from experience, thoughts without a thinker) but is commonly deemed thereby to reduce its level of explanation to the individual and interpersonal. From the other (social) side of the binary, more recent accounts of societal or community-level affect flows appear to omit the workings and agency of minds in the circulation of (unconscious) resonances.

In recent data analysis, I have used the concepts of 'scenic' ('an affective and embodied register of meaning', Bereswill et al 2010:225) and 'scenic understanding' deriving from Alfred Lorenzer, German cultural analyst and psychoanalyst. He suggested that it was possible, through scenic understanding (a process by which research data are reflected upon through affective and embodied experience), to access a form of unsymbolised socio-cultural knowledge that he referred to as 'collective unconscious, admittedly not in Jung's sense'.

In this talk the selected data extracts are drawn from psychoanalytic observation notes, generated as part of a funded psycho-social research project. Through these, I explore two instances of 'unthought known' material that emerge into symbolisation: the first generated by a friend of the participant visiting the home where the weekly observation takes place (recorded in observation notes) and the second occurring during data analysis. Each shows societal issues of wide historical importance (racial, generational, class-based) manifesting in relational processes during the research encounter, when methods are adequate for noticing and reflecting on these. Aided by the reflections of the conference, I want to ask 'Is the idea of socio-cultural unconscious knowing useful in making sense of what is happening on the actual occasion represented in the data extract? And does this concept help psycho-social research to conceptualise the learning achieved through noticing and reflecting on researchers' emotional responses?' Opportunity to participate in reflections on the data extracts will be available during the course of the morning.