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# ANALYSING THE ANALYSED: TRANSFERENCE AND COUNTER-TRANSFERENCE IN THE ORAL HISTORY ENCOUNTER

by Michael Roper

## ABSTRACT

**KEY WORDS:**  
interview  
relationship;  
reflexivity;  
subjectivity;  
psychoanalysis;  
transference;  
counter-  
transference;  
unconscious;  
Kleinian theory;  
Freudian theory

Based on life-story interviews with psychoanalytic psychotherapists, this article demonstrates the value of thinking psychoanalytically about the oral history encounter. It argues that concepts of transference and counter-transference can be valuable resources, not only in helping oral historians to deal with difficult moments within the interview, but in interpretation. Contrary to some recent work within the field, which has focused on the narrative construction of identities, the article warns against too exclusive a focus upon the words spoken in a life story interview. The interview is not simply a narrative, but rather, a relationship in which there are two subjectivities in play. The life story that results from this encounter is always informed by unconscious dynamics. The problem for the researcher is how to remain sensitive to these dynamics during the interview, and how such sensitivity can enrich subsequent understanding. A key issue here concerns the researcher's capacity to tolerate, and reflect upon, anxiety. These concerns are investigated through an analysis of transference processes in two interviews with psychotherapists.

This article draws upon the recent experience of interviewing psychoanalytically trained psychotherapists in order to reflect on the nature of the oral history interview as a personal encounter. My title is of course playful. I do not for one moment think that oral historians should or could place their informants 'on the couch'. On the contrary, having now interviewed fifteen practitioners, all of whom have had a personal analysis, extensive clinical training, and ongoing supervision, I have become

more aware of the difficulties which can occur when non-specialists export psychoanalytic concepts and methods from the clinical setting. At the same time, these encounters have encouraged me to try and observe the life-story method from the vantage point of the psychotherapist. They have on the one hand sensitised me to psychoanalytic ways of thinking, and on the other, sparked insight about aspects of the oral history interview which might fruitfully be considered in psychoanalytic

terms. If we are not the psychoanalysts of our informants, this is not to say that psychoanalytic theory has nothing to teach us.

What I have learned from the project is the importance of the interview as a relationship. This may not seem a very profound observation in the current climate of reflexive sensitivity, when the researcher's personal involvement in data collection, far from 'tainting' the source, is often now regarded as the very touchstone of interpretation. This 'reflexive turn' within social science, prompted in particular by the influence of feminist methodology, has encouraged recognition that the knowledge produced in an interview is always situational, the product of interactions between two people. Rather than simply furnishing 'external' evidence of social life, the interview is itself a social relation, which can generate a variety of emotional responses.<sup>1</sup>

### TRANSFERENCE IN THE INTERVIEW

Yet, when reading such accounts, despite their introspection I am struck by a sense that something is missing, and that the reflexive turn does not quite capture the more subterranean aspects of the interview relationship. Reflexive accounts are certainly alert to ways in which considerations such as age, ethnicity, 'race', gender or class shape interactions within an interview. However, they tend to operate with a rather too-conscious notion of the self, as if the subjectivities operating within an interview were wholly the products of social structures and scripts acting upon the individual. Elements of desire, memory, and primitive conflicts – the realms of the psychic – seem curiously absent. Such accounts are rarely attuned to what would for the psychoanalyst be a fundamental feature of any such encounter; that is, the unconscious material which, on both sides, is being brought into the relationship. Karl Figlio has pointed out that when interviewing we are in a transference situation, whether we like it or not.<sup>2</sup> What he means by this is that the empathy between interviewer and interviewee is shaped by the emotional residues of the past which both parties bring, inevitably, into the encounter. There is no relationship without transference, and the more intimate the relationship, the more powerful the transference. Transference in the clinical setting thus refers to the enactment of emotional fragments of past relationships in the present, and the manner in which they re-appear in the immediate situation of the analysis. Counter-transference by contrast is concerned with the analyst's feelings. It is seen, particularly in Kleinian theory, as a central resource in interpreting the patient's state of mind. Through sensitivity to the

counter-transference, addressing for example the difficulties which the patient's transference presents for the analyst, an understanding is reached of how the patient is acting upon the analyst, and for what reasons.

Whilst oral historians have considered the emotional aspects of the interview relationship, they have usually done so in relation to interviewees or topics regarded as especially sensitive. Research on interviewees who have endured traumatic experiences in war has emphasised the capacity of their emotional states to be re-activated – voluntarily and involuntarily – at later moments.<sup>3</sup> David Jones, drawing on his research with victims of child abuse and the families of people suffering from mental health problems, points out that unconscious motivations may 'leak out' in the interview situation, just as they do in the analytic one.<sup>4</sup> He considers the psychological impact that the narration of distressing experiences has upon the interviewee, as well as on the interviewer, who may well feel overwhelmed by the counter-transference. The emotional dynamics of interviewing have also been discussed in research where the positive empathy we might normally expect between interviewer and interviewee is for some reason difficult to achieve.<sup>5</sup> In such studies the emotional aspects of interviewing present themselves in particularly intense ways. Transference processes, however, are not confined to 'heavily emotive subjects'.<sup>6</sup> Transference occurs in *all* interviews, the interview being by definition, a relationship. Once this is recognised, the question then becomes how the unconscious processes operating within an interview can best be recognised and understood.

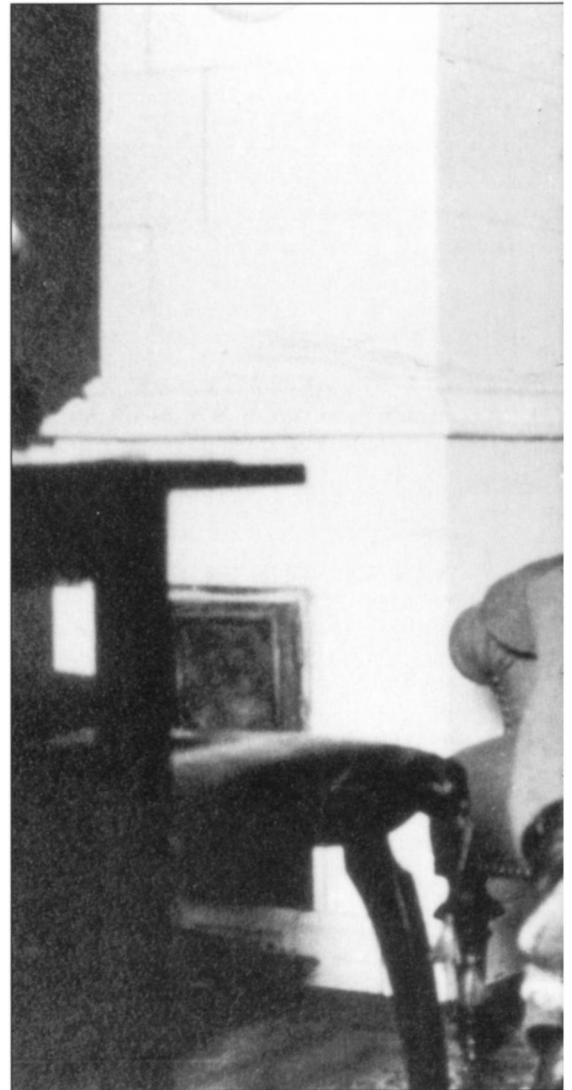
As qualitative researchers of a special kind, our situation in the life-story interview is analogous to that of the analyst in some important respects. Firstly, our approach involves encouraging the informant, through attentive listening, to develop their account in the way they wish. The result of this is, as Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson observe, that the informant may reveal more about themselves than they are consciously aware of. In the sense that life-story narratives 'contain significances beyond the teller's intentions', they share something with free association.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, upon reviewing her transcript, one of my interviewees spontaneously described as 'free association' the account that she had given me. Secondly, this kind of interview usually involves the recollection of early experiences with primary figures such as parents and siblings, about whom there are often deep and unresolved feelings. When interviewing we actively encourage our informants to allow us to feel, with them, something

of what they have been through. Aspects of the emotional content of such relationships will be, inevitably, evoked in this process of recollection. Our informants will tend to respond to us in ways that, if they do not repeat, then approximate their relationships with significant figures from their pasts. This is what is meant by transference. In listening to these accounts, and experiencing something of what our interviewees experienced then, we may in turn have to deal with counter-transference, a triggering of anxieties and conflicts from our own pasts, brought alive by the material in the interview. Moreover, whilst the point of the life-story interview is not therapeutic – we do not seek to convert transference into interpretation for the benefit of our interviewees – there are nevertheless some affinities between the roles of analyst and interviewer. Penny Summerfield has observed that the interview process may just as often result in a sensation of ‘discomposure’ as it does a fluent and emotionally contained narrative.<sup>8</sup> In requiring our subjects to dredge up the past and render it in words, we must be able to tolerate the pain and anxiety that recollection brings. We, like the psychoanalyst, are thus sometimes in a position of having to contain or hold difficult feelings.<sup>9</sup>

#### TRANSFERENCE AND INTERPRETATION

My questions are these: given that transference is going on, how can we capture it, and how might the knowledge of transference affect our interpretations? First, how we capture it. In their *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods*, Taylor and Bogdan remark that in tape-recorded interviews ‘the interviewer’s data consists almost entirely of words’.<sup>10</sup> An interview does of course consist of words, but when we say it is a relationship, we include aspects such as body posture and movements, facial expressions, and gestures, which, together with words, convey emotional states. The clues as to these states may not lie in the words heard, even less in the recording of words, and even less in a transcript. In the interview encounter, as in the analytic one described by Betty Joseph, our informants will convey ‘experiences often beyond the use of words, which we can often only capture through the feelings aroused in us’. Our sense of the *mood* of the interview sometimes gives a better indication of what is going on in it than words.<sup>12</sup>

Barry Godfrey, in a recent article for *Oral History*, asks how far the emotions conveyed in an interview are captured in the recording or transcript, and how this emotional content might affect the later interpretation of such



material by researchers, even those who were not present at the original interview.<sup>13</sup> He shows how the transference finds its way onto the record, even affecting third parties. However, Godfrey maintains a traditional notion of the relationship between the emotional processes in the interview, and subsequent analysis. He views the interview relationship as ontologically distinct from the narrative given, and presumes that the interviewer/reader’s emotional reactions to the transcript will be set aside during the process of interpretation.<sup>14</sup> Regarded from an *experiential* viewpoint, such a position seems odd. From the point of view of analysis, it is problematic as it ignores the value of the transference as an interpretative resource. The question for me is not how far the evidence of emotion creeps into a transcript, or might affect





the researcher's capacity for 'dispassionate analysis', but how, for the purposes of interpretation, we can preserve the most complete evidence of emotional relationships.<sup>15</sup>

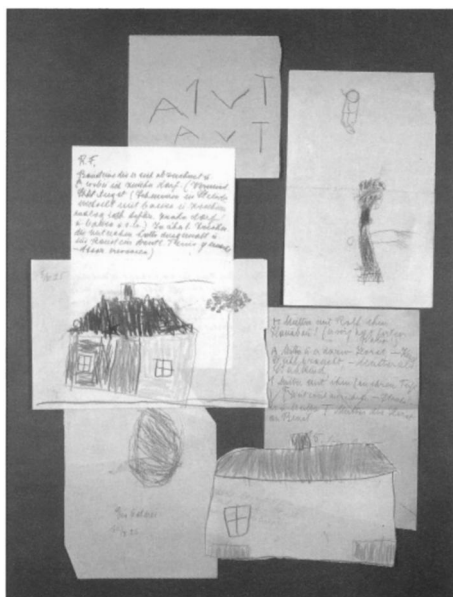
Perhaps the most powerful experience I have had whilst interviewing for this project, amounts to a transcript of just 8,000 words. My interviewee was someone who, as I shall explain later, was deeply sceptical of the value of words. Interviewing him was an almost painful experience, as I felt pushed right up against his internal world, as if he and I had no skin. I was forced to feel with him, the allure of an analysis in which negative feelings of envy, aggression and competition were stirred; his perceived failure to write in a manner that captured clinical material; the loss of an infant son and present illness of another; and remorse at

having been a 'stupid father'. I find myself re-reading my field notes, and listening over and over again to the tape of my interview with B., puzzling over what was going on between us, nurturing the memory of what I felt at the time.<sup>16</sup> Too much significance can be given to methods that organise and categorise the words in an interview.

The effect of theoretical trends within life-story work over the past decade – specifically, the linguistic turn – has been to encourage a rather blinkered perception that the interview consists merely of words. Narrative approaches might critique the status of oral accounts as transparent 'fact', but in so far as they fail to recognise the interview as an experience in which transference takes place, they fall back upon traditional social science understandings

*Freud and his couch, 1930. Picture: Freud Museum, London.*

Drawings used by  
Melanie Klein in her  
therapeutic work.  
Picture: The  
Wellcome Library,  
London.



of qualitative research. The emotional states of interviewer and interviewee alike, and their effects upon the resulting testimony, are rendered largely invisible in the interview-as-text, which can then be interpreted as if it was purely an instance of genre or form, and not a subjective experience.

It is through attention to how the interviewee makes us feel that we can begin to restore something of these lost dimensions. This entails, as Joseph puts it, 'focusing our attention on what is going on within the relationship, how he [the patient] is using the analyst, alongside and beyond what he is saying'.<sup>17</sup> This is not easy. When students conduct their first interview, perhaps their most common response is that they find it difficult to both guide the informant, and listen to what they are saying. I think that this difficulty arises in part because of the intimacy it requires in order to generate a testimony. Empathy in a life-story interview involves being receptive to how the interviewee felt then and makes us feel now. The emotional energy required by such attentiveness makes it particularly hard to keep hold of our own questions and research agendas. Moreover, because pain, loss and disappointment are to some extent universal human states, at some point in an interview we may well be confronted by reactions or memories which feel difficult, and which may threaten our capacity to empathise. I have sometimes found myself repeating in my head, when confronted by anxieties such as these, 'just stick with it, stay with what they are feeling'. Of course one's instinctive tendency is to want to put these awkward or uncomfortable moments behind as soon as possible. During the

interview itself it may indeed be necessary to suspend reflection about the sources of our own anxiety. The necessity to do this in the here-and-now of the encounter, however, should not discourage retrospective insight into what was going on. Jones observes that 'It may be that the upset experienced by the interviewer is a terribly important part of the communication.'<sup>18</sup> A more comprehensive understanding of the encounter – and thus of the words spoken in an interview – is achieved by examining moments of difficulty, when the counter-transference makes itself felt.

## INTERVIEW WITH N

My negotiations with N. prior to our interview were prolonged. She was exceedingly busy and difficult to catch on the phone. Our interview had to be booked up quite a way in advance. I was seven minutes late, having miscalculated the time of the train's arrival, and taken a cab to make up time, which had then become caught in traffic. I arrived flustered and apologised for being late. N. responded by telling me that in any case we did not have much time – just an hour and a quarter – since she needed to have her lunch before the next appointment. We went straight from the hall to her consulting room downstairs. I refused coffee, not wanting to waste further time, and set about getting the equipment ready. On unpacking the recording equipment she observed that I was using a lapel microphone, and commented that she did not like them, the wire connection was a bother. I got her to affix it, but (as I discovered to my horror at the end of the first session) neglected to turn it on. I then commented that I had better tell her something about the project. She laughed and said in a mildly sceptical tone, 'yes, it seems, slightly.... curious'.<sup>19</sup> Having explained our broad aim, to research the relationship between the life experiences and professional careers of psychoanalytically-trained psychotherapists after the Second World War, I then had to correct her impression that I was unaware of earlier developments in her particular specialism. I was mindful of the fact that she had herself written an account of the history of one of the psychoanalytic institutions we were researching, and one which made interesting use of sociological materials. I felt the need to show that I was knowledgeable, and I wondered if she might feel ours was a rival project. This process of mutual 'sounding out' in relation to knowledge characterised our initial exchanges. She went on to talk about her interest in social history, and mentioned an oral historian whose work she admired. Remembering that she was talking to another oral historian, she then seemed a little taken aback.

During the rest of the first session she focused on her childhood, relationships with parents and her aunts, and early career. She described herself on a number of occasions as having been 'disturbed'. As a teenager she had experienced disruption and separation from her parents because of the war. Like many psychotherapists, she described a 'difficult' relationship with her mother in particular: 'I do think I was the sort of child who was projected in to a great deal, by my mother'.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, her aunts were a largely positive presence, especially during the war. She went on to give a detailed description of false starts in her career, and of influential figures, who, for some reason or another, had seemed to over-shadow her. These descriptions centred on the academic career she had not pursued. She told of an epiphany about a lecturing post which she was invited to interview for. In the interim she had accepted a temporary lectureship vacated by a friend. She had found the job 'pretty traumatic really', especially lecturing to large groups.<sup>21</sup> Her sense of the difficulty in making the job her own, of it still really being 'Jane's job', was compounded by the fact that she had taken up Jane's lodgings, and her car. The car symbolised her experience of stepping into someone else's shoes: it was 'an enormous thing, which I couldn't drive easily'.<sup>22</sup> Her analyst, she later learned, was also close to her in background. They had graduated from the same university in the same subject, gone on to the same occupations, and shared the same sports. Her narrative of early adulthood dwelt upon experiences in which, consciously or not, it had been difficult to distinguish her 'I' from others. Despite our halting beginning, in these descriptions she was actively working with the interview, and I began to relax.

The mood at the beginning of our second exchange was rather different. The tape records us exchanging Christmas greetings as a means of testing the recording levels, provoking spontaneous laughter on both sides. She gave a vivid and extremely moving account of her long-term work with a particular client, which conveyed a closer sense of clinical setting and methods than I had experienced hitherto. Her desire to support others through 'rough patches' was a strong theme throughout the second interview, as she told me about her work with supervisees, clients, and others. Having been projected into as a child, she seemed to have developed a particular sensitivity to the problems this caused others. She was currently working with someone from a non-analytic profession: 'bit by bit I feel I'm pulling her into a situation where she can actually observe something and doesn't put too much of herself in it'.<sup>23</sup> As we drew

towards the end of the time we had scheduled, she extended the limit. I then asked her about what qualities she felt she had contributed to her work. One of the factors she mentioned was being 'good at interviewing. I'm good at going with the flow', then added, You know, I had an aunt called Flo'.<sup>24</sup>

Joseph comments that 'movement and change is an essential aspect of transference' in the analytic situation.<sup>25</sup> The same could be said of the interview. At the beginning of the initial encounter with N there was – as there usually is – some anxiety on both sides. I was somewhat rattled at being late, a feeling which in fact hampered my attempts to set the equipment up properly and start the interview. I had to stave off thoughts of impending disaster, a sense that the interview might be ruined because N would be irritated at my lateness, and because time was short. This had undoubtedly contributed to my failure to turn N's microphone on. In contrast to the analyst, whose training and supervision helps to guard against acting out, such a failure might be seen as an enactment of my counter-transference; that is, of my fear of having offended N, and anticipation of her possible anger towards me.

At the same time, however, I think my failure may also have been prompted by N's transference to me. Amidst my own confusion at the time of unpacking the recording equipment I had an acute sense of the intrusiveness of my endeavour. I found myself wondering what earthly right I had to delve into this woman's personal past. This sense was prompted I think by N's reactions to the microphone cord, and then by her seemingly sceptical response to my offer to tell her more about the project. With ethical doubts so much in mind, I struggled to summon an adequate intellectual rationale for our project. N's sense of uncertainty about what the interview would entail emerged further in her response to my description of the project, as she sought to put me right about the history of her occupation. Her initial wariness – experienced by me a sense of slight prickliness – might perhaps be explained in terms of the account she subsequently gave of her childhood and career prior to becoming a psychotherapist. Even with the benefit of analysis, it would be difficult for her to traverse this past without to some extent *re-encountering* the confusion of boundaries. I often had a sensation during the interview of uncanny parallels between her experiences and my own, a sense that her comments may just as well have been my own, as if she was speaking my mind. This was not only in relation to our shared intellectual concerns. Listening to her accounts of her lecturing experiences had



prompted some extremely painful memories for me of 'stepping into the shoes' of my predecessors. Above all, her comment about being projected into struck an immediate chord with me, making me feel that this really must be my mother she was talking about. This sensation of close associations recapitulated something of the feelings that I suspect N had experienced with Jane, her analyst, and others. Without conscious prompting, and in response to transference on each side, issues about the struggle to achieve familial and professional autonomy were present throughout the session.

In the second interview I felt that we had moved on somewhat from these concerns. I had a sensation of time telescoping, as did she. She communicated great enthusiasm for her work. Whereas the first interview had re-kindled my long-standing ambivalence towards lecturing, I now found myself wondering about what kind of a psychotherapist I might make. Her capacity to, as she put it, 'foster... people's development' was something which I experienced directly, when N. observed that she thought I was a good interviewer. This followed immediately on from a comment about her aunt 'Flo'. She concluded by describing our interview as a 'not untherapeutic' experience, because, in contrast to an analysis which is ongoing, it had enabled her to draw various parts of her life together and see them at once.<sup>26</sup>

What was the 'pathway of associations' in these interviews?<sup>27</sup> My reactions to N in the early minutes of the interview put me in mind of my mother, who was often late for social occasions, and for whom lateness was experienced with a sense of panic that never seemed quite commensurate with the occasion, and which could sometimes temporarily deprive her of the capacity to think. In the interview with N. I had reacted precisely like my mother, a case of enacting in the present, a state of mind once transferred onto me. Eased out of this state by the developing conversation with N, it was not long before I was able to recover a sense of professional competence. On N's part, the interview moved from an initial focus on situations in which it had been difficult to establish boundaries between herself and others that felt appropriate, towards accounts which communicated a sense of her competence, and in which the desire to give back to her profession was prominent.<sup>28</sup> Her references to the mother who projected into her, and to her aunt 'Flo', indicate aspects of the emotional contents of significant relationships from her past which were present in our two interviews.

Movements such as these in the character of the empathy between interviewer and interviewee are far from unusual. Qualitative research

textbooks might attribute such shifts to the establishment of 'trust', or 'rapport'. What such terms miss is the capacity of the interview, through the uncertainty that it generates, and its focus on childhood and family background, to re-capitulate particular aspects of earlier emotional conflicts on both sides. In the case of my interview with N, the encounter changed as I moved beyond the family script of immobilising panic, and as N moved from *her* early experiences of being projected into, to her post-analysis, adult life and career.

In trying to assess how and where unconscious material might be being brought into the interview, the interviewer faces many difficulties. Whereas analysis will unfold over many sessions, taking months or years, our data rests on a limited number of encounters, usually held over a relatively short time-span.<sup>29</sup> Freud once remarked that a full interpretation of associations given early in analysis, may sometimes only be possible at the very end of treatment.<sup>30</sup> We are not in a position of being able to reassess initial interpretations in the light of new material given by our interviewees. Furthermore, whilst the analyst might assess the accuracy of an interpretation through a change in the patient's emotional state, we lack such measures. Yet, if our aim is not to psychoanalyse our informants, we nevertheless need to account for movements within the interview in mood and content, and this may require some interpretation to be made of how the lived life, through the story told, is being brought into the interview. In the case of analytically trained practitioners, such assessments are made both easier and more difficult. N's analysis, and her professional facility with analytic concepts, enabled her to give me an already formulated description of psychic states and processes which she had experienced (for example being projected into). She provided me with a kind of diagnostic short-hand. This gave me a closer indication of what the significance of material presented by her in the interview might be, than would normally be possible. In other kinds of interviewing, with those who have not been in analysis, such knowledge would be harder to come by, and we would be even less certain of our interpretations. At the same time, paradoxically, an analytic training can also mean that the unconscious dimensions are harder for the interviewer to reach. Analysis gives psychotherapists a powerful means of consciously monitoring their transference, of not giving too much away. It gives them a language and an understanding of psychic states which encourages description rather than repetition.<sup>31</sup>

Thus even if we accept Figlio's observation that we are in a transference situation, the ques-



tion of how much we can know about *what* is being transferred, and whether our interpretations will amount to more than 'wild analysis' is a pressing one. For these reasons, attention to the counter-transference is particularly important. Perhaps the most useful clues to understanding the content and movements in N's narrative lies in my register of how I felt during the two interviews. This meant not only heaving a sigh of relief that I had at least turned my own microphone on, and putting this lapse of professional expertise behind me, but reflecting on what was going on such that I should have arrived late in the first place, and then failed to turn on N's microphone. It involved sitting with a series of accounts of failed starts, in which I had to re-encounter the discomfort of my own memories of struggling to find my feet. That struggle was not only located in the past, but formed part of the empathy of our first interview. N's story was produced in a context of unconscious associations, and shaped not only by the genres and forms of psychoanalytic talk, or by our respective social situations. The areas of similarity in our backgrounds – for example, our early lecturing experiences – were clearly important influences: my age and occupation probably reminded N of the career she might have had. However, a full understanding both of how N had *felt* during this time, and of the later subjective significance of her experiences, requires that we move beyond the workings of social structures within the interview, to consider the unconscious elements being transferred into the interview setting. In the end, it was my sense of uncanny parallels and uncertain boundaries that communicated most acutely the nature of N's experiences, rather than the words in her narrative. Moreover, whereas reflexivity supposes a rather direct and limited range of associations between interviewer and interviewee according to social status, I would argue that *all* aspects of communication in an interview might be considered as furnishing evidence of unconscious processes. Transference in oral history can be seen to operate, not just in direct associations to us (as in 'when I was your age...'), but in *all the material* brought in to the interview by the respondent.<sup>32</sup> Thus, I was constantly having to reflect on why N had chosen to tell *me* this, at this particular moment in our encounter, and for what ends, and on why I had responded in the ways I did, and with what effect on the interview.

Attention to what we feel, moves us from a position of simply eliciting a narrative *about* our interviewees, to understanding the ways in which their subjectivities are enacted within the interview. This requires a different way of

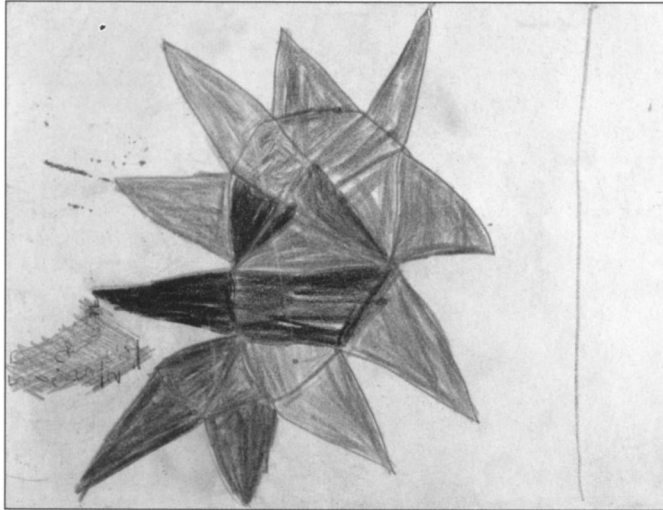


Portrait of Melanie Klein, circa 1950. Picture: The Wellcome Library, London.

understanding to that which the researcher normally adopts. The overall aim might still be to generate narratives or information about the past. Considering the interview as a 'total situation', however, involves not only working with the conscious and rational aspects of the encounter, but with the empathetic and unconscious as well, since all these elements structure our knowledge and understanding.

#### THE 'BIG BLACK, MELANIE HORSE'

If on the one hand I am recommending that oral historians operate in a way that is more attuned to unconscious processes and thus *closer* to the analytic setting, on the other, the project has sharpened my perception of what makes the oral history encounter distinct from the analytic one in terms of the kinds of transference relationships it tends to encourage. Such reflection was prompted particularly by the interview with B. In contrast to some of my interviewees, who gave basic information about their private lives, but were not prepared to be drawn into elaborate accounts, or were careful not to express much affect, the interview with B felt raw from the first moments. He began by offering coffee, but told me that his friends said his coffee was never much good. We started the interview, sitting at right angles. He did not look at me but sat facing forward with his head bowed and eyes half-closed, smoking cigars throughout. Lacking eye contact, I found myself struggling in the early stages, thrown back into the position of the novice. He spoke extremely slowly, with silences of up to 45 seconds. I initially interpreted these silences as a sign that he had concluded his



Drawing by 'Richard', June 1944, used by Melanie Klein (see note 37). Picture: The Wellcome Library, London.

answer and felt myself rushing in to the next question, which soon initiated a pattern of short answers. In other ways too, I found myself lapsing into habits that over the past twenty years of interviewing, I've worked hard to subdue. My questions often ended mid-sentence. They sometimes avoided probing and drew him back towards chronology – the dates of his psychiatric training, war service, the move to the UK and births of his children – a tendency which I tend to adopt when anxious about the material being thrown up in the interview. He commented that he was useless with dates, and in fact, the dates he gave me did not tally up.

Early on he explained that he had had two analyses, the first with a Freudian, the second with Melanie Klein.<sup>33</sup> The difference between these I think formed the lynch-pin of the interview. That with the Freudian, he described as 'done in a kindly way, and benevolent and so on', but as 'really very superficial and descriptive'.<sup>34</sup> By contrast, the analysis with Melanie Klein was 'thrilling'. He had been 'plunged into the revelation of enviousness and ambition and ruthlessness and things of that sort', impulses which had not appeared in the earlier analysis.<sup>35</sup> It was Klein's emphasis on the negative transference that had allowed this to surface. He then narrated a dream he had had during the analysis:

The first night after my first session, I dreamed that I was riding a horse, whose picture was at the foot of her couch, and I was riding this big horse, without a saddle and without a bridle, and really scared! But I was quite a good horseman then, but this was a big black, Melanie horse! And [...] analysis with her was, was quite frightening really, because of her penetration, you

know, she ... she didn't mess about with defences and so on and ... she went for the emotions and the conflicts.<sup>36</sup>

B mentioned Klein's analysis of Richard as the best account of how she worked.<sup>37</sup> I had read this, and commented upon how quickly she dispensed with Richard's external environment in the analysis, interpreting in sexual terms the material he presented almost from the first moments. Later, B spoke of how he had given up writing about clinical material, because he felt that papers so signally failed to capture 'what actually happens in the transference/counter-transference encounter'.<sup>38</sup> At the end of the interview he commented that the account he had given me was 'all egocentricity' and 'not valid historically'.<sup>39</sup>

B's interview has proven extremely fruitful for my thinking both about how a Kleinian analysis works, and about how we work as oral historians. It was a difficult interview for me because B refused the positive empathy which one normally expects, and seeks to foster in interviewing. Although he offered coffee, it was with a disclaimer: this was not meant as a ritual which would help break the ice. He did not make eye contact; in short, he did nothing to put me at my ease, and nor did he seek any reassurance from me about the material he was giving, as most others have. Denied of such niceties, I was forced back into a position of encountering quite primitive emotions. It was the feeling of losing my social and professional skills as an *interviewer*, which alerted me to this. Underlying this professional stripping away was however a deeper feeling. The tendency to leave sentences unfinished is something which developed when I was a teenager, and which I think functions as a means of encouraging positive empathy in other people, who signal their understanding of my internal world by finishing off my sentences for me. Through his rejection of positive transference in the interview, I realised how much I relied upon it when interviewing. This sparked uncomfortable questions about what my own motives might be in seeking to use interviewing in such a way.

B's account of his dream and the Melanie horse enacted precisely what I was feeling at the time; a sense that we were in the midst of profound and dangerous emotions which must be allowed to run loose. Just as he considered himself a good horseman, I considered myself a pretty good interviewer, but we both felt we were just hanging on. There were indeed times in the interview where I had felt in danger of 'losing it', of being overwhelmed by the rawness of his associations. What he admired in Klein

was her capacity to 'stand a lot of... bouts of negative transference': it was precisely this which he now encouraged me to tolerate.

I had in fact offered myself up as in the Freudian position, through my comment about Klein's by-passing of Richard's external environment (the war) and emphasis on interpretation (some Freudian and Middle Group psychotherapists call this 'going for the jugular'). Responding to this, he demonstrated the power of a Kleinian approach to touch primitive conflicts. My sense of timidity faced with the rawness of the material he presented, allowed me to understand his disdain towards his Freudian analyst who had 'never hurt me, never frightened me'.<sup>40</sup> Other aspects of my reactions in the interview confirm the way in which he had come to associate me with a non or pre-Kleinian position. In responding to my comment about the Richard case, he said 'She was absolutely down on the transference and the counter-transference. Everything was studying what was going on right there and then in the consulting room. No nonsense about history and sociology and politics and things like that, but absolutely minutely studying the transference and counter-transference'<sup>41</sup>. In my letter to him I had described myself as a social historian working in a sociology department. His reference to these fields as 'nonsense', and his view that, as history, his account was 'baloney', indicated the extent to which the interview relationship had come to enact this tension between internal and external understandings.

When towards the end of our session I asked B if he felt there were any parallels between the oral history interview and the analytic session, he replied that there were not. In the analytic situation, he explained, 'the focus is absolutely on the moment-to-moment encounter, the transference and counter-transference'.<sup>42</sup> And yet, what B demonstrated in his interview was precisely the importance of such a focus, and as a result I learned more from it about the differences between Kleinian and Freudian positions on the transference than I had done in years of reading. What B did was to represent the differences by evoking them with me, making *me* feel what Klein had made *him* feel. It gave a meaning to differences which had until then seemed abstract and purely theoretical. Much as I wished to avoid the anxiety of riding bare-back through the interview, being forced to do so brought understanding which had hitherto eluded me.

### **EMOTION CONVENTIONS AND THE INTERVIEW**

This experience has also encouraged me to reflect on the emotional conventions of the life

story interview. In the interview with N we seemed to move from a situation of mild mutual suspicion and anxiety on beginning, towards some kind of resolution in which it became possible for both of us to flow. I suspect that this kind of shift is commonly experienced among oral historians, and indeed, is more typical. In my interview with B however, my desire to achieve such a shift was frustrated: my experience of that interview was of emotional impulses which were and remained barely tolerable. B flouted the conventions of the oral history interview, by refusing to allow me to foster a positive empathy towards him.

The interview with B makes me wonder about how far the life-story interview as a genre, operates through generating what he, describing his Freudian analysis, termed an 'atmosphere of colleagues and friendship'.<sup>43</sup> Anxieties are inevitably raised, but the general direction of interviewing often works towards the fostering of coherence and against domination by feelings of disappointment, frustration, failure or despair. This is because firstly, we feel greatly indebted to our interviewees – usually relative strangers – for giving us their time, and for sharing confidences about their lives which make them vulnerable. This may make us timid about pursuing more negative aspects of the transference. Secondly, the use of linear questions, which begin with more primitive childhood experiences and move forwards to adulthood, may tend to encourage an emotional mood in the interviewee of 'moving on', rather than of sitting with difficult feelings.

Such a structure may also seem to the interviewee to require that they produce as 'composed' a narrative as they can. In so doing it might encourage the repetition of what Ian Craib has called 'bad faith narratives'. These are stories which paper over the psychic reality. The individual mobilises them as a defence mechanism, to avoid emotional impulses that feel too painful or dangerous to contain.<sup>44</sup> Thirdly, the political traditions of oral history itself may encourage an emotional atmosphere in which feelings of antagonism or aggression, when directed towards the interviewer rather than an 'external' figure or force, are not easily accommodated. The motivation to want to give back something to people who have in some way experienced oppression or been silenced – the recuperative urge – was and remains a keystone of oral history. In the oral history interview itself, such motivations may take unconscious forms, for example as manic reparation, the omnipotent desire to want to make good another's past, as if we were capable of effacing the private pain caused by social oppression and exclusion.<sup>45</sup> We might enact the recuperative

urge through a highly-developed facility with sympathy, or a tendency to take the informant off difficult subjects to the memory of experiences that reveal their capacity to cope and change, the effects of which may be to curtail rather than allow and contain negative transference. The very injunction of the interview, to construct a coherent account, and, our bias towards relationships in history and the external world, may, if we are not careful, result in failure to properly assimilate feelings of being 'in pieces', or of being dominated by internal objects.<sup>46</sup> The problem with not working through the transference is that we will foster a rather lop-sided empathy. Aggressive and destructive urges – which are always present – may not be given expression, but squirreled away in a desire to encourage what is felt to be a more positive situation, of narrative fluency, warmth and a measure of 'oneness' between interviewer and interviewee.<sup>47</sup>

For reasons such as this, oral historians have much to gain from thinking, over and above the specific intellectual needs of their research, about what attracts them to this form of encounter, and about the connection between their earlier experiences and their capacities as interviewers. I wonder how often it is the case – as it is for me – that interviewers are people used to being projected into, and required to contain others' projections. If it is this which gives me a particular facility in interviewing, nevertheless such situations always threaten to thrust me back into the realms of primitive projective identifications, where boundaries are not clear. I am drawn to interviewing partly because of the manner in which it puts me close up against this earlier sensation, whilst, usually and ultimately, confirming how different other people really are, and my capacity to deal with them as they are.

Even setting aside the complex histories which bring us to interviewing, it is never easy to remain open to the full range of feelings that an interview will arouse in our interviewees and hence us. By its very nature, the recollection of intimate experience will often feel difficult to endure. At such times, as Irma Brenman-Pick has observed in the analyst's case, we have a double task of not only containing the situation for our informants, but of managing our own feelings. Of course, our interviewees do not present themselves to us in the first place because they are experiencing distress, and the bringing in of this distress does not *define* our encounters, as it does analysis. Yet, in the one-off situation of the interview, it is less likely that primitive material will emerge, nevertheless, we and our informants can never be quite sure about what emotional issues the interview will

throw up. This uncertainty, brought about by the capacity of unconscious material to emerge on *both* sides, makes the life-story interview powerful and compelling, but it also generates anxiety. For this reason, Brenman-Pick's observation of the necessity for the analyst to reflect on anxiety has I think some value for us too. The oral historian, like the analyst, is sometimes in a position of having to 'work through the experience of feeling like an overwhelmed mother threatened with disintegration by an interaction with the overwhelmed baby'.<sup>48</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The ideas I have been exploring here have an immediate resonance with oral history, because it is a personal encounter, but to an extent the basic principles of analysis hold good for any form of life history, whether based on oral or written sources. Histories of subjectivity by necessity operate with the stuff of transference and counter-transference, whether or not this is explicitly understood by the historian. In any form of biographical research, as Freud noted, there is an emotional investment in the person being studied. Our choice of subject, and the significance given to particular evidence and aspects of experience (what we deem to be worthy of interpretation), will depend partly on our counter-transference, no matter how indisputable the historical significance of the individual or the intellectual relevance of the questions being asked. In the biographical enterprise there is no alternative but that we cultivate sensitivity to how our subjects felt then, according to how the evidence of their lives makes us feel now. It is a case of allowing ourselves, through a process of empathetic imagination, to be projected into and to hold and process the emotional impulses conveyed through the evidence of past texts. Reflection about what unconscious material belongs to us and what does not – as I was prompted to undertake after the interview with N – is part of this process.

If we seek to do more than explain our subjects' behaviour in terms of economics, social forces, or conscious intent – if, that is, we seek a serious engagement with subjectivity – we have to consider the subject's relationships. This entails paying attention to both the conscious and unconscious elements of relationships. In most historical research this task is complicated by the fact that we must analyse transference relationships indirectly: oral history apart, in most cases the evidence of a life is not given as a response to us in person, shaped by direct human contact. Nevertheless, we may still seek to reconstruct and to understand something of the nature of the transfer-



ence operating between historical actors, and puzzle over the unconscious material which our subjects bring to, and enact within, social situations. We can even ask about how the process of narration itself is being used to contain and process emotional impulses, seeing the transference, as it were, operating within the act of constructing a life-story. Interpretation proceeds

through attention to the counter-transference in all such cases. In this respect the difference between an oral testimony and other autobiographical sources is ultimately a matter of degree rather than of kind: oral history is distinctive only in that the transference is in the room, directed in the here-and-now to the figure of the interviewer.

I would like to thank my two interviewees, N. and B., who gave their time to the project and whose reflections on an early draft of this paper, and their experience of the interview, have greatly helped my thinking. I would also like to thank the audience at the European Social Science History Conference at The Hague; Lyndal Roper and Paul Thompson for their insightful comments; and the reviewers at *Oral History* for their suggestions.

## NOTES

1. On the interview as a social relation see especially P. Bourdieu, 'Understanding', *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol 13, no 2, pp 17-37. On reflexive interviewing see A. Coffey, *The Ethnographic Self. Fieldwork and the representation of identity*, London: Sage, 1999; R. Hertz, 'Introduction: Reflexivity and Voice', in R. Hertz (ed.), *Reflexivity and Voice*, London: Sage, 1997; and J. F. Gubrium and J. A. Holstein, *The New Language of Qualitative Method*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
2. Karl Figlio, 'Oral history and the unconscious', *History Workshop Journal*, vol 26, Autumn 1988, pp 120-133.
3. See for example Nigel Hunt and Ian Robbins, 'Telling Stories of the VWar: ageing veterans coping with their memories through narrative', *Oral History*, vol 26, no 2, Autumn 1998, pp 57-65.
4. David W. Jones, 'Distressing histories and unhappy interviewing', *Oral History*, vol 26, no 2, Autumn 1998, p 49. See also the discussion of the 'hidden' aspects of remembering in A. Thomson, *Anzac Memories. Living with the Legend*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp 10-11.
5. See Kathleen Blee, 'Evidence, empathy and ethics: lessons from oral histories of the Klan', in R. Perks and A. Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, London: Routledge, 1998, pp 333-343; Barry Godfrey, "'Dear Reader I killed him": ethical and emotional issues in researching convicted murderers through the analysis of interview transcripts', *Oral History*, vol 31, no 1, Spring 2003.
6. Godfrey, 'Dear Reader I killed him', p 55.
7. W. Holloway and T. Jefferson, *Doing Qualitative Research Differently. Free association,*

*narrative and the interview method*, London: Sage, 2001, p 35. See however, Jones, and Steinar Kvale for a useful discussion of the problems entailed in interpretations which go beyond the self-understanding of informants.

Jones, 'Distressing histories', p 49, and S. Kvale, 'The psychoanalytic interview as qualitative research', *Qualitative Inquiry*, March 1999, pp 105-7.

8. P. Summerfield, 'Dis/composing the subject. Intersubjectivities in oral history', in T. Cosslett, C. Lury and P. Summerfield, *Feminism and autobiography. Texts, theories, methods*, London: Routledge, 2000, p 91-3. For further comments on the limits of narrative in achieving psychological 'composure', see M. Roper, 'Remembering the Soldier Hero: the composure and re-composure of masculinity in memories of the Great War', *History Workshop Journal*, vol 50, Spring 2000, pp 181-205; and 'Splitting in unsent letters: writing as a social practice and a psychological activity', *Social History*, vol 26, no 3, 2001, pp 318-340.

9. This opens the whole question of whether interviewing does or should fulfil a therapeutic purpose. Holloway and Jefferson point out that the interviewer is often in the position of experiencing painful emotions with the interviewee, but go on to remark that 'it can be reassuring and therapeutic to talk about an upsetting event in a safe context' (*Doing Qualitative Research Differently*, p 87). Whilst I accept this, I think it is important to remember that oral historians are not trained in therapeutic methods, and that for our subjects, the interview will not necessarily be psychologically beneficial. Kvale's comments are relevant here: 'Not having therapeutic training in handling the emotional personal nature of therapeutic relations, interview researchers in the social sciences should be careful not to promote some kind of therapeutic experiences from their subjects' ('The psychoanalytic interview', p 105-6).

10. S. Taylor and R. Bogdan, *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods. A guidebook and resource*, New York: John Wiley, 1998, p 112.

11. B. Joseph, 'Transference: the total situation', in M. Feldman and E.B. Spilius (eds), *Psychic Equilibrium and Psychic change: Selected papers of Betty Joseph*, London: Routledge,

1989, p 157. Kvale points out the importance of material beyond the 'explicitly formulated verbal dimension' - such as bodily posture and gesture. 'The psychoanalytic interview', pp 104-5.

12. Irma Brenman-Pick observes that patients often do not 'hear' the words on receiving an interpretation, and that the analyst must therefore seek an understanding of the 'mood and atmosphere of communication' ('Working through in the transference', in E.B. Spilius (ed.), *Melanie Klein Today. Developments in theory and practice. vol 2*, London: Routledge, 1988, p 36).

13. Godfrey, 'Dear Reader I killed him'.

14. Godfrey, 'Dear Reader I killed him', p 55; p 63.

15. Godfrey, 'Dear Reader I killed him', p 63.

16. See Holloway and Jefferson for accounts of how they kept a record of the transference. They remark on the importance of keeping fieldnotes and re-listening to the interview (*Doing Qualitative Research Differently*, p 46).

17. Joseph, 'Transference: the total situation', p 157.

18. Jones, 'Distressing histories', p 56.

19. Interview with N, p 1.

20. Interview with N, pp 3-7.

21. Interview with N, p 9.

22. Interview with N, p 10.

23. Interview with N, p 40.

24. Interview with N, p 44.

25. Joseph, 'Transference: the total situation', p 157; p 160.

26. Interview with N, p 45.

27. Holloway and Jefferson, *Doing Qualitative Research Differently*, p 41.

28. In Kleinian terms, such a movement might be seen in terms of a shift from the paranoid-schizoid position, in which the infant has an uncertain sense of distinctions between itself and others, and in which difficult feelings are projected outwards, towards the depressive position, in which one feels a desire for reparation, and is capable of accommodating ambivalent feelings.

29. This issue is discussed well by Kvale.

According to him, analysis will reveal 'deeper levels of personality, which may be inaccessible through a brief research interview'. He also

points out that, far from the informant seeking us out, we seek them out, raising ethical issues about interpretations that might challenge how people understand themselves ('The psychoanalytic interview', p 103; p 106).

**30.** Cited in Kvale, 'The psychoanalytic interview', p 94. Kleinians however – see below – are more likely to make immediate interpretations of material given by the patient.

**31.** Freud comments that analysis allows the patient, by transferring onto the analyst something that happened to them in earlier life, to 'transform his repetition into a memory' (*Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis Volume I*, London: Penguin, 1973, p 496).

**32.** The phantasies present in the transference are as Paula Heimann comments 'not something that occasionally irrupts into the patient's relation with the analyst', but ubiquitous. Heimann, 'Dynamics of transference interpretation', in M. Tonnesmann (ed.), *About Children and Children no Longer. Collected Papers 1942-80*. Paula Heimann, London: Routledge, 1989, p 113. Heimann argues for example that patients' accounts of their dreams can be interpreted as a means of expressing impulses towards the analyst. See also Joseph, 'Transference: the total situation', pp 156-7.

**33.** Born in 1882, Klein, with Anna Freud, is considered as a founding figure in child analysis. Klein became involved in psychoanalysis in the 1910s, partially through the experience of rearing her own children. Her ideas focused more closely than Freud's on the maternal relationship. The question of how far her ideas could be considered as building upon

or deviating from Freud's theories has pre-occupied psychoanalytic movements since the 1920s. The sometimes heated debates of the inter-war period culminated in the 'controversial discussions' of 1942-5, the outcome of which was the setting up of separate courses for Freudian and other (Kleinian and 'Middle Group') trainee analysts under a single training committee. See P. King and R. Steiner (ed), *The Freud-Klein Controversies 1941-45*, London: Routledge, 1991.

**34.** Interview with B, pp 6-7.

**35.** Interview with B, p 4.

**36.** Interview with B, pp 5-6.

**37.** Klein's *Narrative of a Child Analysis* was first published in 1961, shortly after her death. It is a detailed, session-by-session account of a four month long analysis of the 10 year old Richard, compiled from her case notes, and constitutes the fullest account Klein gave of her clinical techniques and interpretations. The analysis was conducted in Wales during the Second World War, where Klein and Richard (whose parents had moved to the country for the duration of the war) were living. In the sessions Richard shows great interest in and concern about the events of the war. He followed the war news closely. Many of his drawings depict aeroplanes and warships engaged in battles, and he often expressed his fears about bombing. In the analysis, these fears are interpreted by Klein as deriving from primitive *internal* conflicts. See M. Klein, *Narrative of a Child Analysis. The conduct of the psychoanalysis of children as seen in the treatment of a ten-year old boy*, New York: The Free Press, 1961.

**38.** Interview with B, p 16.

**39.** Interview with B, p 31.

**40.** Interview with B, p 6.

**41.** Interview with B, p 5.

**42.** Interview with B, p 30

**43.** Interview with B, p 6.

**44.** See I. Craib, 'Narratives as bad faith', in M. Andrews, S. D. Sclater, C. Squire and A. Treacher, *Lines of Narrative. Psychosocial Perspectives*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp 64-75.

**45.** See M. Klein, 'Mourning and its relation to manic depressive states', in *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works, 1921-1945*, London: Vintage, 1988.

**46.** Gabriele Rosenthal remarks on the difficulties which oral historians experience in interviewing traumatised informants, and how we often tend to adopt a 'well meant attempt to shut the door'. 'German war memories and narratability', *Oral History*, vol 19, no 2, 1991. Hollway and Jefferson comment too on the danger that, if experiences are too painful for the interviewer, they might feel unable to contain them and instead, 'throw them out', for example by offering reassurance (*Doing Qualitative Research Differently*, p 49-50).

**47.** See Figlio's account of research on the subjective experience of wage labour in Germany, in which the interviewer's attention to a counter-transference of exhilaration led her to an understanding of undercurrents of aggression in the interviewee. 'Oral history and the unconscious', p 124.

**48.** Brenman-Pick, 'Working through in the transference', p 46.