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Intersubjectivity and the mental health nurse as insider researcher

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Intersubjectivity and the mental health nurse as insider researcher

Ayres et al.'s (2021) recent reflective account published in the BJMHN discusses Ayres' experience undertaking a doctoral study concerned with how mental health nurses who have been assaulted by patients in secure settings make sense of this experience. This commentary recognises the importance of extending the dialogue initiated by the account, specifically regarding intersubjectivity in research relationships and research beneficence. An emphasis is placed on how practitioner participation in research interviews, whether as interviewer or interviewee, can be a cathartic experience and foster practice reflection. However, engagement in more sensitive research may also present additional risk considerations for the insider researcher, including in relation to emotional safety risks.

Key words: intersubjectivity, practitioner research, reflexivity, research beneficence, sensitive research topics

Ayres et al's (2021) recent contribution to the BJMHN narrates Ayres' experience undertaking a doctoral study concerned with how mental health nurses who have been assaulted by patients in secure settings make sense of this experience. Meaningful links between research and clinical care can be built by exploratory practice-inspired projects, and Ayres' study epitomises this type of a project. Ayres and her co-authors contribution is a valuable methodological and ethical account, raising several points which inspire further discussion. As clinician-researchers and academics supporting nurses involved in research, the pertinence of the discussion points prompted us to reflect, specifically, on the issue of researcher reflexivity in practitioner research, as well as ways in which participating in research interviews can be a cathartic experience for mental health practitioners and foster practice reflection.

Of particular interest was how these issues could be considered via recourse to a psychodynamic framework. While not explicitly situated as such, Ayres et al allude to tenets associated with psychodynamic theory in the reference made to the projection of emotions from researcher to participants. A psychotherapeutic perspective can also be thought of as implicit in comments made about participants valuing the opportunity to speak about their experiences (i.e. that taking part had something of a cathartic or therapeutic quality).

Clinician-researcher reflexivity

As a matron in a secure service, Ayres holds an insider researcher position in the account, acknowledging the professional understanding she shares with participants, in terms of vocabulary, accepted norms, ways of thinking and so on. As the authors reported, this proximity affords advantages, but they recognise that care must be taken to ensure sufficient distance to maintain the capacity to reflect.

This reflection is especially important in the context of sensitive research or research in settings that may pose increased physical or emotional safety risks to the researcher (Parker and O'Reilly, 2013; Tang et al, 2020). Clinical expertise or training may be both a risk and protective factor in managing these issues. Training and expertise likely offer expertise and skills in de-escalation and managing difficult situations, as well as clinical supervision, but conversely may encourage more in-depth probing that may expose the insider researcher to greater emotional situations. The role of reflexivity is arguably therefore pivotal in the ethicality of researcher safety as well as that of participants.

Simply stated, the idea of researcher reflexivity captures connections between a research enquiry, the researcher, and the findings (see, e.g., Probst, 2015), encompassing the theoretical and epistemological presuppositions brought to the enquiry, as well as the researcher's various identities (in terms of their social positioning, race, class, sexuality, personal and professional background). Reflexive accounts in the reporting of research are beneficial in informing the reader of affiliations and differences between the researcher and participants and how the researcher went about making sense of the data they gathered. However, conventional forms of reporting reflexivity can be viewed as restrictive with respect to intersubjectivity in research relationships and, as Frosh and Baraitser (2008, p. 360) describe it from a psychoanalytic perspective, 'ways in which each person "uses" the other, unacknowledged and unconsciously'.

There is a rich empirical and methodological literature concerned with how concepts from psychoanalysis can enrich the notion of researcher reflexivity, the understanding of researcher-participant relationships and research endeavours more generally, including around the topic area with which Ayres is concerned (e.g. Berg, 1985; Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, Marks and Mönnich Marks, 2003; Gadd, 2004; Boyle et al, 2009; Cooper, 2009; Drapeau, 2009; Hollway, 2009; Sturm et al, 2010). Psychoanalytic ideas addressed in this

literature include transference, countertransference, projection, and projective identification, as well as technical and practical adjustments in the doing of research, for example, using more unstructured interviews more closely resembling 'free associative' therapy dialogue and recording detailed 'process' notes after interviews. Importantly, the extent to which this type of psychoanalytically informed approach is feasible or appropriate depends on the scope of the project and training and experience of the research team. Research relationships are much shorter lived and instituted via a different set of expectations to therapy relationships. In interviews, there are risks the researcher adopts a powerful or 'arrogant' position of viewing their own affective experience as indicating something about the participant's inner experience, notably by the researcher reporting an interpretation about emotions the participant cannot bear and so projects onto others (Lapping, 2011, pp. 136-137). A more relational stance, involving the sharing of formulations or findings may offer some solutions here, but there are dangers of conflating therapy and research, giving rise to thorny ethical quandaries in practice (Hoggett et al, 2008).

While we would maintain that there is a great deal of value in this type of psychoanalytically informed methodology, we would also suggest that 'simpler' interview and qualitative analysis approaches may be preferable for the novice researcher investigating a sensitive topic, even if they are an experienced clinician and have experience practicing psychotherapeutically. Perhaps not unsurprisingly, what can complicate things are ways the clinician-researcher may struggle to shed aspects of their clinical identity as they listen and respond to participants in interviews (Long and Eagle, 2009). The participant can also approach the interview in a different way knowing the person interviewing them is a nurse or mental health professional by background, possibly seeing the interview as more akin to reflective discussion or a form of professional debriefing (Archard and O'Reilly, 2022a). In this context, reflection becomes increasingly important in monitoring the identity shift

between ‘researcher’ and ‘clinician’ and managing participants’ expectations of how the interview will be undertaken. There is a risk that, in more sensitive research, greater emphasis, or indeed, perceived demand, is placed on clinical identity. If managed effectively however, there is benefit for both the researcher and participant in accessing this during an interview.

Research beneficence

Alongside this, that the practitioner participant may approach the research interview with another clinician as a potentially cathartic experience also reinforces, for us, the need for dialogue with participants about the experience of taking part (Archard and O’Reilly, 2022a, 2022b). Practitioner researchers should be encouraged to closely consider research beneficence in their projects. They should seek to enquire after the experiences of those they interview, as well as noting their own feelings, especially in terms of any sense of fulfilment in helping any participants gain a greater sense of mastery of their experience. This may be viewed as even more important when working under specific working constraints, as in the context of the pandemic, and addressing sensitive topics meaningful to practicing mental health nurses.

Taking research beneficence seriously can simply mean having and documenting conversations at the end of interviews about how they were experienced, and analysing comments made by participants for commonalities and differences in what is said (Lakeman et al, 2013; Archard and O’Reilly, 2022a, 2022b). It may be that few participants consider the experience out-of-the-ordinary, although others may find the interview afforded them some degree of personal and professional insight. Of course, if one is to take a psychoanalytic approach into the entirety of a project, one needs to consider any comments made about the research in terms of latent motivations, for example some degree of idealisation of the

researcher may be at play if they are represented as especially perceptive or sensitive (Archard and O'Reilly 2022a, 2022b).

Conclusions

Taken together, these considerations regarding researcher reflexivity and research beneficence foreground the value of practitioner-researchers reflecting on their own trajectories in the fields of practice and research: What is the influence of this background on the methods and theoretical frameworks one is drawn to? What disciplinary boundaries are encountered, and how are these navigated? Moreover, at a basic level, the idea of doing psychoanalytically informed (practitioner-led) research may be less about the psychoanalysis of the research subject, than attending reflectively to one's relationship to the subject field and object of investigation, making space for the toleration of discomfort, examining rather than glossing over methodological tensions encountered (Proudfoot, 2015). An example of an opportunity to do this is provided in Ayres et al's account, where time was taken to reflect on feelings evoked during the research and the meaning of assumptions about potentially being viewed as inconsiderate by prospective participants in continuing with interviews after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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