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The Place of the Unconscious in Qualitative Research

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Abstract: We know our research design, how data is structured, the questions we ask, methods we use and many other factors allow some meanings to emerge and obfuscates others. We speak as though these decision-making processes are entirely logical, but an intuitive leap is often necessary. The writer maintains that unconscious mental processing is a necessary part of qualitative research, lying under what we call "reflective processing." Some difficult research situations are discussed and ways they might be understood reflexively are shown. Ideas about reflection on the impact of subjectivity in the research process are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

Today researchers talk freely about reflective processes in qualitative research but twenty years ago this was not so common. Reflection has joined the world of qualitative research; the fact that this journal's call for papers has resulted in two volumes rather than the anticipated one is a good measure. But what do we mean when we speak of reflection and what it is that goes on in our mind when reflecting? Perhaps most important, how do we harness this process so it can be most useful? [1]

The present is not the first time reflection has received attention in relation to research. In 1620 Sir Francis BACON said,

> "There are and can be only two ways of searching into and discovering truth. The one flies from the senses and particulars to the most general axioms ... this way is now in fashion. The other derives axioms from the senses and particulars, rising by a gradual and unbroken ascent, so that it arrives at the most general axioms last of all. This is the true way, but as yet untried" (BACON, 1620, aphorism 19). [2]

BACON is talking about something similar to what we now discuss as reflection. In the late 19th century, reflection once more came into vogue, probably one of many times. Sigmund FREUD spoke of his mentor CHARCOT's approach to studying puzzling material.

> "Here is what he himself told us about his method of working. He used to look again and again at the things he did not understand, to deepen his impression of them day by day, till suddenly an understanding of them dawned upon him. In his mind's eye the apparent chaos presented by the continual repetition of the same symptoms then gave way to order." (FREUD, 1897, p.12)
>
> "I learnt to restrain speculative tendencies and to follow the forgotten advice of my master, Charcot: to look at the same things again and again until they themselves began to speak." (FREUD, 1914, p.22) [3]

Without delving into the history of science, it would appear that such pendulum swings are common. I am sure other writers in these volumes will provide ample discussion of this history so that it is not necessary to detail it here. [4]

2. What Is Reflective Processing and How Does It Work in the Mind

Perhaps it is useful to think what we mean by reflection? Webster's New World Dictionary says

> "a reflecting or being reflected 2. the throwing back by a surface of sound, light, heat, etc. 3. anything reflected; specif. an image; likeness 4. a) the fixing of the mind on some subject; serious thought; contemplation b) the result of such thought; idea or conclusion, esp. if expressed in words 5. a) blame; discredit b) a remark or statement

> imputing discredit of blame c) an action bringing discredit 6. Anat. A turning or bending back on itself." (GURALNIK, 1982, p.1193) [5]

It is the fourth meaning we usually mean when speaking of reflection in the research process, as well as in clinical work or teaching. When we reflect, we are generally trying to think about something in detail, usually more closely than usual. Often we are trying to see in new ways or gain a fresh and new understanding of the subject. We tend to apply several methods in a reflective process. [6]

Reflective processes are often deconstructive. We may identify components of an idea previously accepted as whole. Sometimes a sequence of events is identified, along with their relationships to each other. The metaphor of a lens often is used, with the observer either magnifying the field of observation so more detail can be seen, or collapsing the field so broad features stand out. [7]

In their introduction to a popular sourcebook on qualitative analysis, in a section on common features of analytic methods, MILES and HUBERMAN (1994) name various ways of sorting or sifting through materials assembled for analysis. These include the identification of similar phrases, relationships between variables, patterns, themes, distinct differences between subgroups, and common sequences (1994, p.9). In a later passage, MILES and HUBERMAN add further methods of analysis: noting patterns, themes; seeing plausibility; clustering; making metaphors; counting; making contrasts/comparisons; partitioning variables; subsuming particulars into the general; factoring; noting relations between variables; finding intervening variables; building a logical chain of evidence and making conceptual/theoretical coherence (1994, pp.245-262). [8]

Metaphorically, the research process involves something like shining a light into a dark corner. Something is seen which makes the observer curious. One looks more closely and asks questions, which help shape further observations. At some point the literature is often consulted which helps shape observations and formulate more questions. This process is repeated until the observer's curiosity is satisfied. [9]

3. Finding Meanings

We know our decisions about what to study, the methods we use to obtain data, the very questions we ask and the vantage points we consider in making sense of our findings affect our research. Most researchers try to identify as many of these variables as possible, but they seem generally to be considered nuisances, unavoidable aspects of the research process and hazards that may diminish the value of our results. Don't we—at least some of the time—behave as though it is the data alone that holds the meaning? [10]

Of course, meaning is in the data, but it is up to us to *find* those meanings. It is this area of the research process that the researcher's reflective activities, occurring in and out of awareness, are most important. The researcher's analytic

methods serve as a set of lenses allowing some meanings to emerge while diminishing others. In the rest of this paper I shall explore how reflection can be used both to deepen and strengthen our processes, and thus our findings, as well as helping avoid some of the blocks researchers often encounter. [11]

3.1 Taking the bull by the horns

Unconscious mental processing is not a favored topic of discussion in research circles. As I've talked about this paper with colleagues, a pall of silence often fills the room, if I am lucky there are a few sparks of interest. Sometimes colleagues suggest I avoid psychoanalytic language and that I find another way to talk about this subject. After thought, I've decided this stems from a misunderstanding of the unconscious and that it is negligent to avoid it. After all, I believe an important aspect of the reflective process is not fully in awareness, and psychoanalysis is the field in which unconscious processes are explored most fully. Therefore I will give a brief review of psychoanalytic ideas about the unconscious which seem applicable to this subject. [12]

People who are not psychologically inclined often see the unconscious as something human beings can't control. This can make it seem frightening and something to be avoided. One response is to pretend we can be aware of everything if we just bring enough effort to bear; another is to acknowledge our limits and what we don't know. Both are important and useful, but missing is an understanding of how the unconscious can serve positive ends, how it can help us do our work. [13]

4. The Place of the Unconscious in Qualitative Research

Different data management programs accomplish different things. This is why several packages for qualitative research exist. Different software offers different approaches to the challenges posed by research problems. Even with a careful choice of software, it still *must* be the researcher who drives the project. The planning, structuring, organizing, identification of questions, choice of software, method of coding and even what emerges as "data" all are processed not only through the computer and other data management tools, but also through the *researcher's* mind. With qualitative research we are always throwing a net to see what we can catch. If we throw a fine-meshed net we will probably catch lots of small things, some important and some less so. If we are lucky, once in awhile we may find a pearl. If we throw a large-meshed net, we will miss many of the smaller findings, but we might get a better look at the larger issues. There are always choices, and it is *human beings* who make those choices. [14]

As with our assumptions about where meaning lies, we tend to behave as though all these processes are logical, operating fully in awareness, but ultimately, there is an intuitive leap. At some point we are dependent our own mind to make a decision in a certain way. It is at this point that we begin dealing with the *unconscious*. Most of us will agree that having some way of gaining distance or perspective is an ubiquitous part of the research process, often seen as a

nuisance or worse. It seems to me that if we want to understand something more about these intuitive leaps, this is exactly where we need to look. We need to try to shine a brighter light into these areas rather than trying to dismiss them as something we can't do anything about. [15]

My own thinking about this began a few years ago when a qualitative research listserv was for a time filled with discussion of over-tired coders. For me, this resonated with my own mother who, when faced with a knotty problem, turned to a jigsaw puzzle. She said working on a different kind of puzzle often helped her solve the one in her real life. I was also reminded of the adage "sleep on it" when stuck with a difficult math exercise. I began to think about the value of processing which takes place *out* of awareness, envisioning it as occurring in the "back of the mind." I now see this kind of activity as one way of allowing access to less conscious processes, e.g. making space for the unconscious to do its work or turning the question over to the unconscious. [16]

A British psychoanalyst named Wilfred BION said thinking requires the engagement of both affect (emotion) and the intellect (1967, p.109). Particularly in regard to research, there is a danger of our settling too solidly on the side of the intellect. We sometimes forget to allow the other parts of our minds to enter the picture. Further, many of the difficulties and blockages we encounter while doing research take place because we are not listening to information available to us. We tend not to recognize this information as messages from ourselves which have arrived in a disguised way and need to be deciphered. We tend to assume there is no meaning in a tendency to waste time, for instance, when deconstruction may shed light on the meaning of this behavior and provide clues allowing the blockage to be undone. There are many ways of turning the problem over to less cognitive parts of the mind, which has special capacities for dealing with vexing problems. We worry about giving up conscious control, even for a little while, but it seems likely that this may be exactly what is needed. [17]

Perhaps it will help to gain a further understanding of what the unconscious is and how it works? [18]

4.1 What *is* the unconscious?

According to FREUD's (1923) structural theory, our mind consists of several parts. The conscious mind, governed by what is called the "reality principle" has to do with logical thinking, planning, etc. It is the familiar, orderly part of our mind. Most of us would be more comfortable if we operated in this area most of the time. There are other parts to the mind as well. FREUD (1915) identified the *preconscious*, which is an intermediate or transitional state, and the *unconscious*. He thought we never entirely became aware what was in the unconscious and that the *preconscious* was where we might find clues about the contents of the unconscious. [19]

For our purposes, it seems useful to be imprecise and think of mental contents as vacillating between more and less conscious parts of the mind. When doing

research, we move between thought that is well grounded in reality, emotional reactions, associations and those odd ideas that seem to come out of nowhere but can be invaluable. Sometimes our ideas come in words, in logical form. At other times they come in images, ideas we can't dismiss, music that stays in our mind, perhaps a memory. Often, if we are able to follow these thoughts, the associations lead to valuable insights. What is more, if we fail to pay attention to the associations as they appear in small ways, if they are important, they are likely to make themselves known in other, perhaps less pleasant, ways. Some, of course, seem to be fleeting thoughts that never reappear or are dismissed and do not seem to resurface. [20]

4.2 What is *in* the unconscious?

Traditionally, psychoanalysts have spoken of the unconscious as a part of the mind where repressed material is kept. The "repressed" refers to memories, thoughts, experiences which are unacceptable to the reality-oriented parts of the mind. They are stored away in a less accessible place where the uncomfortable contents are less likely to appear at inconvenient moments. Because at the time the repressed material entered the unconscious, there was generally pain, we may fear approaching the contents of the unconscious. Indeed, it can be painful when previously repressed material enters awareness. The gateways to the unconscious are also mostly not under cognitive control, which many of us find hard to understand and, for those of us used to being able to control most aspects of our functioning, a frustration. The best most of us are able to do is provide conditions under which the unconscious may be able to process material. This amounts to making room for evocative experience and some mental space for reflection. Interestingly, the qualitative software and recommendations for use are constructed in a way that allows this to take place. [21]

One of the difficulties about the unconscious is that good things are there as well as painful material. The unconscious serves a defensive function; thoughts, memories and emotions associated with the repressed material are also repressed. In my work as a psychotherapist, I've often thought that to the degree a negative experience is repressed, the counterpart emotion is also limited. So, if someone is avoiding mourning a loss, it may be that the person also will have difficulty finding joy. When someone is busy maintaining a boundary of protection around repressed painful material, there is almost literally less room in the mind for free, creative thought. [22]

4.3 How does the unconscious work?

If we can understand something about how the unconscious works, perhaps it can become a little less daunting? Here is a brief overview of different ways the unconscious processes material taken from RAYNER and TUCKETT.

> "Logical laws of thought do not apply ...
>
> The emphasis/direction/intensity become displaced from the idea and superimposed onto other ideas ...
>
> Several chains of associations may be collapsed into a single idea (condensation) ...
>
> Not ordered by time ...
>
> No regard to external constraints, replacement of external by internal reality" (RAYNER & TUCKETT 1988, pp.8-9). [23]

So the unconscious doesn't operate by the usual rules of logic; time does not provide its usual order, things usually connected with one another may be separated and things not usually connected may be combined. This upsets several familiar ways of thinking, but it can open up and rearrange the material, allowing it to be seen in new ways. In some ways this is not too different from what we do in processing our observations, though we tend to pretend that our research processes are entirely logical. [24]

BOLLAS speaks of the unconscious, thorough associative breaking up of material, as creatively processing mental contents. Giving examples from science and musical composition (which could also apply to research) he identifies something called "unconscious play work." An idea may come immediately, but BOLLAS thinks it is more likely that "... a period of intensive unconscious play work will go on in the mind of the creative person until something announces itself" (1992, pp.75-76). This takes place through an associational process, a chain of ideas that may not seem logically related at all. Most of us will recognize this phenomenon and it is also what CHARCOT and BACON meant. Allowing ourselves to follow such a chain of associations can be very anxiety provoking, but also profitable. [25]

BOLLAS tells us EINSTEIN used the term "combinatory play" in relation to mental effort in which there is a play with the elements, prior to logical construction. He refers to this as "... the receptive process that occurs inside each of us as we form genera: a combinatory play that leads to the eventual establishment of a new perspective." (BOLLAS, 1992, p.76) Henri POINCARE, the mathematician, described his version of the discovery process.

> "... every day I seated myself at my work table, stayed an hour or two, tried a great number of combinations, and reached no results. One evening, contrary to my custom, I drank black coffee and could not sleep. Ideas rose in crowds: I felt them collide until parts interlocked, so to speak, making a stable combination. By the next morning I had established the existence of a class of Fuchsian functions, ... I had only to write out the results, which took but a few hours" (GHISELIN, 1952, pp.33-43). [26]

While writing this paper, I had dinner with a neighbor who is a physicist. My mind was full of my thoughts about the paper and it became a topic of discussion. My neighbor immediately knew what I was talking about and gave the example of a problem that had stumped him some years earlier. At some point he began to take the problem apart, and eventually found he was questioning some

assumptions involved in a particular theorem which had been previously accepted in the field. With further work he identified a flaw in the theorem. [27]

BOLLAS (1995) speaks of an ordinary dialectical process involving an oscillation between our tendency to "condense" disparate information, combine ideas and thoughts and the opposing tendency to break things up, to take them apart. We need both sides, condensation and deconstruction. However, when carrying out a highly demanding cognitive or intellectual process, and maybe especially when engaged in an activity like coding, we may tend to curb the part of our mind which emphasizes the breaking up of material, working prematurely toward synthesis. We may wish to consider our tendency toward procrastination as a signal from ourselves that it might be useful to pay more attention to the other pole. I think it depends on the researcher and perhaps the material and topic; different people or a given individual at differing times may find that the processes of deconstruction or synthesis are more difficult. We need to make sure both are involved. [28]

5. Evidence of the Need for Unconscious Mental Processing in Relation to Research

When I began to think about the evidence for unconscious mental processing in research, what came to mind was a number of situations in which my patients and I have had difficulty. Professionally I am a clinical social worker. For a long time I worked primarily as a psychotherapist, the past ten or more years seeing a good many graduate students who were having difficulty completing dissertations. I have come to think that the unconscious appears not only when there is difficulty, but that this may be a place where it may be more *obvious* because we are waging an internal battle between different parts of ourselves. I have identified several situations where difficulties in the research process arose for my patients. [29]

5.1 Getting stuck

A number of people referred to me because of depression and other symptoms were also stuck with their dissertation. These were competent, mature graduate students who had already achieved a great deal; they felt perplexed at their inability to master this difficulty. When we thought together about the problem, sometimes what began to emerge was the idea of something unacknowledged or unseen which needed consideration, rather like the proverbial elephant in the room. Through this clinical work, I've come to think that research is quite likely to have an unacknowledged personal link for the researcher. Inadvertently the researcher selects a question or project that in some way represents an internal conflict, something with which the researcher struggles with in their life. At some point, a related conflict is encountered in the research project, and, if severe enough, can block progress. One solution is to become more aware of the relation between the personal conflict and the research. This, perhaps paradoxically, separates the personal from the professional enough to carry on with the work. [30]

A student was writing about the work of a famous man. He came to therapy for reasons unrelated to the dissertation but from time to time his research came into our discussions, particularly his inability to make headway. We began to realize the subject of his study had struggled with similar issues to those of the student. Both held unpopular liberal views, in the context of being generally conservative people, making it uncomfortable to step out of the mainstream. The student realized that unconsciously he had hoped for a solution. He was dismayed to learn his hero not only had no solution, but had experienced quite a lot of the same sort of pain the student hoped to avoid in own life. When the two could be seen and examined, it became possible to separate the man in the paper from the real life of the student, and the dissertation could be completed. [31]

A chemistry student was looking into the reactions between two compounds. Something kept going wrong with the experiments. Not being a chemist, I understood the difficulty being as if the student was trying to mix oil and water. I am sure it was more complex. Eventually a parallel between the work of the laboratory and issues in the student's personal life began to emerge. He began to realize his wife was a separate person with thoughts and feelings of her own, different from his. More importantly, he began to be able to accept this and relate to her as a separate person. The marital situation improved, but it was also at this point the work in the laboratory began to go more smoothly. [32]

Quite a lot of painful self-exploration was necessary to resolve both situations. In both of these examples I've collapsed years of work into a few words. Obviously much more was involved. Most of us want to keep our intellectual life safely separated from our personal situation but in fact, there is often much more connection than makes us comfortable. [33]

5.2 Wasting time

How many of us play hours of computer solitaire? Or find that the dishes absolutely must be done right now, or that phone calls must be returned, before going back to the computer? We feel guilty about spending time in these ways, but this doesn't usually help us get back to work. [34]

What is this wasting time about? If I may anthropomorphize, I think much of it has to do with our minds putting on the brakes, dragging its heels. We aren't quite ready to do what it is that our work calls us to do. If we are writing, we aren't ready to put things together in a coherent way. If we are coding, perhaps we aren't ready to take things apart? I am suggesting this may not be simple avoidance or procrastination. I find it useful, when I am able to remember, that my mind may be conveying the message something further actually is needed. Sometimes—only sometimes—if I can consider the difficulty from this point of view, I can identify another approach. I may need to mull things over a little longer or work for a time in a very different direction from what I had thought might be the next step. I suggest we listen to our hesitations, to what seems like an inclination to waste time, and to try to locate a message from ourselves in them. [35]

Sometimes the particular activity we feel inclined toward provides hints about what part of the task needs attention. In what ways might this activity symbolize a part of the research process? This sort of thought requires relaxing our mental processes, letting our minds "go loose" and allowing associations to emerge. The *free association* process of psychoanalysis is, of course, the prototype. BOLLAS (2002) has written a very readable modern description of this process. Some level of direction is possible, especially for those of us who are unaccustomed to free association. How might coding be like doing the dishes, for instance? Isn't there a sort of ordering in the process, separating wheat from the chaff? Stacking and arranging? We know how to wash the dishes and most of us will have developed a pattern to the task, perhaps glassware first, then silverware, then china, pots and pans last. Perhaps feeling pulled toward the dishes has something to do with a need to think a little more about what we are doing in our coding? Maybe there is something that needs adjusting, rethinking? Maybe a new idea is beginning to emerge, perhaps a new way of structuring things, maybe something else entirely? Unfortunately, it is difficult to be sure exactly what is needed, but if a researcher can allow their own associations to emerge rather than shutting them down, it is likely that some of the time useful ideas will emerge. At this point, trial and error are effective and if a solution or partial solution is found, the researcher usually can recognize it when it appears. [36]

5.3 Lying fallow

My work necessarily proceeds in an uneven fashion because the questions I select are often not well-articulated by my field. In a parallel fashion, writing this paper serves as an initial exploration of some questions which have intrigued me. I do not yet see how, or if I might conduct a more formal research in this area; it is quite likely I will decide it is not necessary. A latent period is frequently part of my process and I suspect this is also true of other researchers, perhaps especially people doing qualitative work. As a result, I am usually working on several things at once, with one project more in focus at any given time. I have come to understand periods of dormancy as an integral part of my process, quite active but considering ideas and material on levels other than the direct and cognitive. On a farm, when crops are rotated, the fallow period is anything but stagnant; it is a very active time in which the microrganisms structure themselves for a new period of productivity. The same appears to apply to some aspects of human functioning. [37]

How to manage this aspect of research will play havoc with rushed grant-driven or contract work. I have no good answer, other than to try to recognize our own personal processes and make allowances for the "slow" points ahead of time whenever possible. It is also important to pay attention to the nature of the work. Are the required questions and processes clear at the outset or will there be a significant amount of thinking needed? The latter will slow down the process and there may be no shortcuts. [38]

5.4 "Stupid" work or woolgathering

Frequently there is a point in my research when I find I am working hard, but not creatively. One point where this can happen is when I have turned to the literature after making initial observations. At some point, I find I have copied large chunks of material or spent hours coding in a disengaged fashion. Once I discover this has happened, I am often incapable of turning to a more focused mode of activity. What I have copied is generally on topic, but my mind is not fully engaged. I am not actively processing the material, not thinking about it in a deep way. On the listserv, several people spoke as if something similar takes place while they are coding. The quality of the work suffers. [39]

It is tempting to berate oneself for carrying on effort on this level and certainly one would wish not to continue it for a long time. Yet, perhaps such an effort serves a purpose? It may provide a sort of *intermediate space* (WINNICOTT, 1971, p.105) slowing down the rate at which material is taken in to a more manageable pace. I sometimes need to take in complex material in stages. I skim first, translating the material into my own words. This can require several tries. I may need to play with the ideas and work with them. If I can realize I'm not just sinking into some sort of automatic state, but that this is a tough section and I can't do it in my accustomed fast pace, maybe I can stop berating myself and instead, begin to use the information as a clue about what might be more effective? [40]

5.5 Focusing on one's own work

Another aspect of independent research is the difficulty of focusing entirely on one's own work. Doctoral students have often been very successful in their previous performance, but this has been at the direction of someone else, perhaps a parent, teacher, or dissertation advisor. It is very difficult to set aside time purely for our own work Endless obstacles arise and it is much easier to do work which responds to someone else's demands than setting goals simply for oneself. People in this position will fare better if this is recognized and accepted, which then allows quasi-artificial deadlines to be set, perhaps with the help of the dissertation advisor or some other authority figure, even a dissertation support group. [41]

6. Suggestions Toward Accessing Material Not Fully in Awareness

A frontal approach attempting to excavate less conscious material is not likely to be successful. Psychoanalysis is specifically designed for this purpose and strongly recommended but not always available. Fortunately, there are some resources that may be available to the researcher who wishes to gain increased access to this material without entering analysis. A caution: what follows is by no means a foolproof system; it is merely some suggestions that may help to open our minds. [42]

6.1 Making repeated passes at the same material

Some ways of treating data provide an opportunity to go deeper. In teaching an infant observation seminar (MEEK 2002), I began to realize that the very process of making repeated passes at material offered the possibility of capturing observations which had initially gone unrecognized. This sort of layering and repetition also takes place with some of the coding methods used in qualitative research and in recognized ways of approaching qualitative research (MILES & HUBERMAN, 1994, pp.55-66; ROBSON, 1993, pp.206-226). Repeated passes are made at the data, allowing the mind to process the material several different times and in different ways. This allows material to come to the surface that had not been initially seen. Each time the material is revisited, an opportunity exists for further material and new ways of understanding to emerge. [43]

6.2 Continuing to look at the same data

Sometimes continuing to look at data brings new realizations. A student defended a dissertation for which I had been a reader. Continuing to look at her quantitative data had helped her identify a discrepancy which had not initially been obvious. Something wasn't hanging together. Using this recognition, along with her finely tuned powers of self-awareness, she began to realize her data contained further important material (COOPER-WHITE, 2000). [44]

6.3 Breaking up the data

Often I have thought my stalled Ph.D. students kept their noses too close to the grindstone. They allowed themselves little time for relaxation, walks, watching films, or listening to music. Of course they did these things, but without self-authorization, leaving nagging feelings of guilt that destroyed any positive effect the activity might have had. We all need breaks, changes of activity, especially activity that evokes memories and emotional experience. Dissertations can become dead because they live too much in the intellect. BION's (1971) insistence that thought must include both emotion and intellect applies here. This suggests that regularly scheduled breaks are needed, along with relaxing pleasurable activities which bring memories and affective experience. [45]

6.4 Making space/gaining distance

Many methods of making mental space have been mentioned. One which has not been discussed so far is creative visualization. At some point when feeling stuck I found myself using the term against a wall to describe the blockage. I began to mentally take a few steps back, imagining myself sitting on a hillside looking at the wall. I asked "What kind of wall is this?" "What color?" "What is it made of?" "If I back up a little, can I see some way through?" I was surprised to discover that sometimes my hillside was a grassy field and at other times it was barren, composed of sand and rocks. The wall looked different too. One day it would be tall, made of grey castle stone. Another day it might be a stockade fence. One time I found I had been looking at a movie set! Different walls offered different

opportunities too. If I could sit back and look, often I would find a gate or a stairway or a place to attach a rope. I could just walk around the end of the movie set. Like my mother's work on the jigsaw puzzle, or the proverbial sleeping on the insolvable algebra problem, when I can find a way through the imaginary wall, very often I also discover I have come through the *conceptual* wall. Of course the method is not infallible, but surprisingly often something about the conceptual difficulty becomes more clear over the next several days. [46]

6.5 Deconstruction vs. integration

When doing qualitative research there is always a dilemma over when to continue creating new categories and whether to begin knitting the material together. There are pitfalls on both sides. Initially, it is important not to attempt premature synthesis. This can bring the danger of keeping the conceptualization too much in the intellectual domain, not allowing room for a spark of creativity. It is just as important to be able to tell when to begin synthesizing the material again. The deciding factor must come from our own mind, an intuitive leap. We are talking about a balance, not settling on either side. [47]

Writing about qualitative research, Pat BAZELEY and Lyn RICHARDS (2000) speak about the possibility of coding becoming a seductive task which offers the possibility of moving through the material, allowing a sense of accomplishment, but also avoiding thinking about the data. They suggests staying with a process which moves back and forth between coding, writing memos and journal entries about the thoughts which arise about specific points and ideas about the overall project can help avoid settling either in the breaking apart or the integrative phase. [48]

6.6 When to stop coding?

The software packages and principles of qualitative research suggest there is a point at which coding can end, but everyone seems to have a question about when this is. When does theory emerge? For a rookie researcher, the usual answer is not very satisfying, that continuing to code, breaking up the data and moving back and forth between coding, reflection and reworking will eventually tell us when to stop. I like my own answer, which is to continue the process of coding and reworking *until my curiosity is satisfied*, but do not expect this is much help to the new researcher. The answer to the question, "When should I stop coding?" has to come from inside the researcher. It can be informed by the purpose of the research, constraints of funding and time, and so on but ultimately the decision must be made in one of those intuitive leaps best grounded by processing in the less conscious parts of the mind. [49]

7. Conclusions

Unconscious mental processing is an integral and often unrecognized part of creative work, including research. It is perhaps especially important in qualitative research. The author gives a brief introduction to reflection and points out that the research process does not take place totally in awareness, and that it is not the data alone which hold the findings, but also *processing* in the researcher's mind. A summary is made of some modern psychoanalytic ways of looking at unconscious processing stressing the similarities between this process and the research process and identifying some useful aspects of mental work which take place partially out of awareness. Finally, several examples are given from the writer's clinical work as a psychotherapist, in which it was important for researchers, stuck with their dissertations, to become more aware of personal issues going on out of awareness. In these descriptions, a few suggestions are given toward the researcher listening to the messages from themselves which may be embedded in their blocked process and allow the turning over of the material to a less aware part of the mind. [50]

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