Challenging emotions

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Abstract
This paper contributes to work in emotional geographies by engaging with Liz Bondi's (2005) focus on relationality and challenge to geographers to explore how their emotion might connect with the feelings of their subjects. Through the lens of a focus group meeting that created confusing feelings, it shows the hurdles that geographers face when they engage with practices developed in a psychotherapeutic setting. The paper is not so much a critique, more a desire to continue the conversation regarding how to approach and adopt psychotherapy's theory of practice in a research context.

Key words: relationality; Bondi; emotion; affect; psychotherapy; focus group

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Introduction

In a paper called *Making connections and thinking through emotions; between geography and psychotherapy*, Liz Bondi (2005) made a critical contribution to the growing significance of emotional geographies (Anderson and Smith 2001; Davidson and Milligan 2004; Parr 2005; Davidson et al. 2005). Central to her paper was the idea of relationality and the challenge to geographers to not simply explore their own emotion or that of others, but to explore how their feelings might connect with those of their subjects. Reflecting on such experience is important for meaningful research and creating knowledge (Bondi 2005; Knowles 2006; Holland 2006; Hubbard et al., 2001). To support her agenda Bondi (2005) introduces the potential of psychotherapy's theory of practice for geographical research. In this paper I explore my experience of a focus group through the lens of this theory of practice, highlighting the challenges I faced in the hope of moving discussion and efforts forward.

I found Liz Bondi's (2005) paper informative - especially the part on different theories that inform psychotherapy, inspiring - because of its introduction to psychotherapy's theory of practice - and daunting - where do I go from here? Whilst this paper explores some of my concerns, it is not meant as a critique as such, more a desire to continue a conversation within the frame - or 'facilitating environment' (Bingley, 2003) - of her paper. I suspect that, in the vein of her paper, I should not expect easy answers, but perhaps some kind of forum for myself (and others) to work things out might be possible. This paper attempts to open up a space for further conversation through its focus on a small piece of research on young people in the Northern Fells of Cumbria (Bennett et al. 2005). It details my experience of one of the focus groups, and one group member in particular.

Making advances

In this section I explore how Liz Bondi (2005) has advanced my understanding of emotion, setting out the key messages of her paper:

Do not objectify emotion. From the outset, Bondi is concerned that emotion should not be turned into some kind of abstract concept, but embraced in ways of being and experiencing that fuel and enhance our attempts to explore and understand. She writes:

> 'At the core of my argument is a plea for emotion to be approached not as an object of study but as a relational, connective medium in which research, researchers and research subjects are necessarily immersed' (Bondi 2005, 433)

Disrupt distinctions between emotion and affect, feelings and representations of feelings. Bondi's (2005) approach draws together emotion and affect, confronting divisive thinking and writing that separate emotion, its association with heady experience and nameable states from affect, associated with embodied feelings that are pre-discursive or extra-discursive (Thrift, 2004). Non-representational theory has created an important space for the latter, challenging the privileging of cognition, seeking alternative ways of illuminating feelings and different kinds of intelligence regarding experience (see, for example, McCormack 2003). Such theory, however, has met with critique because it is 'too little touched by how people make sense of their lives, and therefore too 'inhuman', ungrounded, distancing, detached and ironically, disembodied' (Bondi, 2005, 438; see also Thien, 2005). Bondi's (2005) focus on psychotherapy's theory of practice offers an approach to emotion and affect that potentially 'dissolves' oppositions, working with not simply expressions of emotion, but the extra-discursive too (see Bingley, 2003).

Remember that emotion is relational…'to avoid the twin pitfalls of equating emotions with individualized subjectivity and conceptualizing affect in ways that distance it from ordinary human experience' (Bondi 2005, 441). Relationality means that my feelings cannot simply be explained through my self, but through my relationship with others and the context of our interactions and connections.

Psychotherapy's theory of practice (Do not ignore your feelings (Katy)) Bondi (2005) presents psychotherapy's theory of practice, showing researchers the significance of their feelings for their research. Before reaching this point, she guides us through critical theories of the subject that shape different traditions of psychotherapy that do not sit easily alongside one another. Whilst psychoanalytic approaches theorise persons as 'conflictual, decentred and 'other' to/than themselves' (Bondi 2005, 438), humanistic approaches theorise persons as 'already whole and integrated, sometimes distorted….as a result of inhabiting damaging environments' (Bondi 2005, 438) and scientific approaches theorise persons as 'governed by perception and cognition, which may be 'faulty' but which can usually be 'corrected' at least partially by cognitive methods' (Bondi 2005, 439). Furthermore, as Harris and Huntington (2001) point out, the different traditions 'are internally inconsistent as theorists have modified original concepts and approaches to practice. For example, Freudian theory has been redefined in ways that lead to major schisms within the psychoanalytic community: "There is nothing in psychoanalysis, from its most general principles to its most specific observations, that can be said to be universally accepted" (Frosh, 1987)' (Harris and Huntington, 2001, 138). Despite differences between and within traditions, Bondi finds 'affinities and similarities between their modes of practice' (Bondi 2005, 439) that fuel psychotherapy's theory of practice.

Psychotherapy's theory of practice focuses on relationships to appreciate the transpersonal nature of feelings which are 'inspired relationally and contextually' (Bondi 2005, 441). Various forms of identification[1] and processes of transference and countertransference shape relationships. In psychoanalysis transference refers to the earliest patterns of relating that are (creatively) carried through into subsequent relationships. Countertransference refers to the 'stuff' and feelings of the psychoanalyst in a psychotherapeutic relationship. Important for the sustenance of a therapeutic relationship are empathy ('commitment to understanding the client's form of reference' (Bondi 2003a, 324)), unconditional positive regard ('acceptance and respect for the person of the client' (Bondi 2003a, 324)) and congruence (honesty, transparency or genuineness within the relationship with the client' (Bondi 2003a, 324))[2].

On the face of it, this theory of practice is not dissimilar to how I attempt to go about my research. At a deeper level, it requires rather more of me, not simply a few tweaks in the way that I do things, but more of a shift in how I relate to others. Bondi (2003b) writes that 'empathy entails oscillating between participating in processes of (unconscious) identification, and remaining aware of – observing – some distinction (however fragile) between one's own and the other person's inner realities' (2003b,74). In a research relationship, this requires the researcher to be 'emotionally present'(Bondi, 2003b, 71) and open to the interviewee triggering feelings in them, to reflect and to seek to convey their understanding of the other person's emotional experience. But in the process of recognising such feelings, the researcher is, in effect, projecting what they

[1] In psychoanalysis, the boundary that separates subjectivity from the outside world is perceived to be permeable, enabling the processes of introjection and projection critical to identification to happen. Introjection is a process whereby an individual absorbs, or takes into herself, aspects of others (Klein 1997). Split off parts of the self are projected into others so that when these others are seen to possess such parts there is a sense of identification

[2] These 'core conditions' are associated with the work of the American psychologist Carl Rogers (Bondi, 2005).

have felt onto another. Empathy shows the relationality of emotion, and the impossibility of simply attributing emotion to either the interviewer or interviewee. Unconditional positive regard requires the researcher to be non judgmental. Congruence requires the researcher to be herself, emotionally genuine and honest in her relationship with the other person. All three 'core conditions' pose challenges for me, which I bring into play through focusing on relationships that shaped focus group research in the following section. I will expand on these challenges later.

Experiencing Relationships

There are a number of relationships that I want to introduce and work through here. Firstly, is my relationship to the Northern Fells of Cumbria in North West England, the deeply rural context for my study on youth out migration. I have an on-going attachment to the Northern Fells which began through a previous research project when I spent many months there during and in the aftermath of the 2001 Foot and Mouth Disease Outbreak (see Bennett et al. 2002). I grew to know people there through the research that I did and the places I stayed. When I returned to Newcastle, connections with the Northern Fells lingered and I returned to work on a bid with members of the Northern Fells Group for funding from the Northern Rock Foundation to study youth out-migration, particularly exploring issues that forced them to leave and working on potential initiatives to ease lives when they wanted to stay (Bennett et al. 2005). Issues of housing and employment were critical.

Secondly, relationships developed through the focus group work that comprised the project. Twelve focus groups were arranged, organised around age and gender, one of

which I focus upon here. This group included Sam, Gladys, Ann and Stephanie[3] who were aged either fifteen or sixteen. All the girls knew each other through school and living locally but I did not know the extent or depth of their connections and the sort of tensions and affinities that these might have affected in the focus group meeting. Also present was myself and Keira, who was from the area, had recently left school and was employed to assist the group meetings, helping, for example, to settle people at the start of the meeting and make them feel comfortable.

The group met on a winter's evening in 2004 in a parish hall which was quite small and tended to host smaller local events, such as Sunday School meetings. Consequently, on the walls in the kitchen, where we were sat around a table, was artwork from Sunday School activities embodying Christian symbolism, values and morality. The room affected us in other ways too. It was a reminder of how little social space there was for young women in the village as we were surrounded by pictures drawn by children and notices aimed at (elderly) coffee meeting attendees. The room reinforced feelings of marginalisation in a village where the women were too young to drink alcohol in the pub and their bottoms 'got stuck in the swings because they're, like, for two year olds'. As the women developed this theme of feeling out of place in a context where facilities and services were designed around the needs of others, I began to feel what might be described as angry, frustrated, anxious and lonely but I tried to keep calm and focused. These feelings strengthened, however, as discussion focused on the community minibus, which is run by local volunteers. When I asked the women what the minibus was used for Gladys explained that it was 'to go to town. To go to hospital…..It takes old people to hospital'. Gladys, like the (grand)parental name she made up for herself and wrote on

[3] The young women chose names for themselves, which they wrote on labels to identify themselves. I have chosen to change their names again, attempting to keep the essence of the name they selected. Sam, for example, chose a name for herself that did not identify a particular gender.

her label, was often the first to answer, describe and explain. She also encouraged and chastised behaviour in the group, earlier rebuking Sam for dwelling too much on 'old people'. Quiet at first, Sam was funny and made the others laugh. Encouraged by Gladys' own reference to old people, she continued to dwell on 'all those geriatrics' and how it took them 'like an hour to get on the bus' which, with its high roof and wheelchair access, and reflecting its occupants, 'chugged' along and did 'like 10 miles an hour'. As the conversation and laughter flowed I was increasingly surprised by how I was feeling. The discussion was interesting, reflecting attitudes to a service available to young people, but much more joking and I began to feel that the group would be beyond control. I had deliberately designed the group work so that it was unlike the disciplined environment of school. I asked open questions and followed where they led me with prompts. I joined in the laughter, but I was not being myself or 'emotionally genuine'. I was uncomfortable about the dynamic between Gladys and Sam, feeling scratchy with all the references to 'old people' and uneasy with how I was experiencing the group.

The final relationship that I want to introduce, and upon which I want to dwell, is my relationship with Sam. I have been surprised by how much I have been pre-occupied by the group, and Sam in particular, since the focus group meeting. Details of the meeting, such as how Sam was sat at the table (difficult to put into words) fill my head and I linger over some of the unsettling things that she said, such as how she felt like hitting the naughty children at the place where she did her work experience (see also Kleinman and Copp 1993; Blackman 2008). Whilst she made group members laugh, she also came across as particularly vulnerable. At one point she talked about being hauled into a meeting at school to talk about welfare issues. 'I told them nothing'. When asked by Gladys why they wanted to see her, she evaded the question. Sam also affected how the meeting had ended. We had been talking for more than two hours and whilst most

members of the group seemed ready and prepared for the meeting to end, Sam did not. Every time I tried to bring things to a close, the conversation would dribble on, prompted by Sam. Then Sam wanted to choose a new name and asked if she was able to do this. My response was that we were drawing to a close and that it was too late to start writing new labels. Unhappy with this reply, she said that she wanted to use her proper name and followed this with the words 'I demand respect' to which I replied that she might 'be lynched by old people'. Although this made other group members laugh, I regretted my snappy response. Sam muttered that she would be able to crawl faster than the old people could run and then went quiet for a few moments as others chatted. I continued to feel guilty so that when Sam asked if she could take home the spare badges, I immediately agreed even though they were needed for another meeting the following day.

The group meeting felt an emotional mess that I feel ill equipped to explain in a particularly meaningful way here or for the purposes of the research generally. I was also confused by my feelings at the time of the focus group meeting. Briefly and with hindsight I attempt to bring some insight to my messy feelings. Group dynamics themselves are a potential place to start. Whilst we, the participants in the group, were involved in its particular dynamic at a specific moment, our connections with other groups, especially perhaps our families, also influenced its substance. Even though we were not in the physical presence of such groups they probably influenced our behaviour in this group, affecting its particular dynamic. Socialising or working as part of a group reminds members of their family and feelings of dependency, safety, love, hatred and the quest for independence and separation. Anxiety can be felt in groups when individuals unconsciously re-experience sibling behaviours such a rivalries, bullying and envy or feelings and conflicts with parental figures when they feel pressured or unappreciated by

the more influential group members (Morgan and Thomas 1996). I can't help but feel that Sam's family and 'welfare issues' affected my experience of the group.

Following on from this, there was a sense that Sam began to feel frustrated by Gladys' sometimes controlling behaviour, initially playing up to the way in which she was identified and then frustrated or anxious about this identification. It was Gladys who introduced the subject of 'old people' once more, having ticked off Sam for talking about them so much earlier. To the group's amusement, Sam continued the focus on 'old people' and 'geriatrics', the latter said slowly, deliberately and with each syllable exaggerated to maximum effect. Whilst Sam filled the conversation with asides about old people, the others smiled and laughed. Eventually, though, Gladys' admonished her once more, positioning her in the role of child, the class clown. What has happened in this group is perhaps not dissimilar to Sam's experience of other groups, particularly her family, where she might also be identified in a way that sits uncomfortably with her own sense of self.

Moving on from group dynamics, I want to focus a little more on Sam and my relationship with, and experience of, her. Not quite so evident in the words of the transcript was the sense of vulnerability about Sam that I experienced. Reflecting on the conversation, where Sam is concerned the transcript is full of incomplete stories. She swam competitively, but when encouraged to talk about this in more detail she said that she had stopped going to early morning training and left us all hanging in silence. As already mentioned, her family life hovered on the margins of conversation. She joked about not doing well at school, struggling with one of her subjects. Perhaps, to some extent I identified with Sam, recognising some of her experiences and feelings. Or, being a little empathic, I projected what I have felt onto Sam. I too swam competitively as a

teenager, training in the early hours of the morning before school. I too chose a subject at 'A' level that made me feel a failure and I remembered the disappointment of a work experience placement in a travel agency. But maybe laughing when not amused and not being genuine I affected Sam's incomplete stories.

Then again, perhaps Sam experienced me as an 'old person' rather than the teenager I was nearly two decades ago. And maybe this made me feel uncomfortable. Perhaps to Sam, I was the 'old person' - the teacher that could not teach the subject that she was barely passing, the 'nosy' adult who wanted her to talk about personal issues, a grown-up who did not understand her.

Challenging emotions

The previous section shows the uncertainty that coils around my attempt to understand the relational dimension of emotion. In this section I consider the challenges that geographers face in more detail when they are guided by psychotherapy's theory of practice in their research efforts. I hope that these are not insurmountable because I remain intrigued and excited regarding improving practices concerned with the emotional dimension of research for the sake of ourselves, interviewees and our attempts to create meaning and knowledge (Knowles, 2006).

The first challenge I face is myself, someone with no training in psychotherapy, although with plenty of interest in Bondi's (2005) introduction to psychotherapy's theory of practice, the psychoanalytic turn in geography generally (Callard 2003; Parr and Philo 2003) and 'psycho-social' methods advanced by prominent academics that include Wendy Hollway and Valerie Walkerdine (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Walkerdine et al., 2001, 2002; Lucey et al, 2003). Psycho-social methods (see Hollway and Jefferson, 2000) and

research practices encouraged by Bondi (2005; see also Bingley, 2003) seem to be propelled by academics with backgrounds in psychology or many years of training in psychotherapy and counselling (Brown, 2006). Whilst I can see the potential for those with appropriate training to adopt practices developed in psychotherapy for the purposes of social science research, I am less certain that a geographer like me, with no such training, can equally approach such methods and practices, despite assurances from Bondi (Bondi 2005, 2006; see also Oliver, 2003; Holland 2006). Many geographers, even those practicing methods influenced by techniques developed in psychotherapy, are wary of group work or interviews journeying close to what might feel like psychotherapeutic space (Burgess et al. 1988a, 1988b). How the journey will work out and when it will end is a frightening prospect.

For me, a deep void seems to separate psychology's theory of practice from a researcher wanting to engage with feelings in a meaningful way. Even the 'core conditions' developed by the American psychologist Carl Rogers and considered important by Bondi (2005) regarding research relationships are tricky issues. I find it difficult to be non-judgemental and harder still to be myself, or 'genuine', in research relationships. This is a question that plagues many. Rogers (1967) wrote that beneath many of his clients' concerns was 'Who am I, *really'* ((his emphasis)1967, 108) and worked at creating a therapeutic context that encouraged his client to drop the masks and become his/herself. But just how aware we are of those masks is another matter. Thien (2005), in a paper exploring the spatialities of intimacy, wrote that the 'the psychic and social reiteration of subjectivities allows for the possibility that we 'may be strangers to ourselves'' (2005, 194). I also find empathy tricky and, as my earlier discussion shows, can be overwhelmed by feelings, cutting conversation short, ending sessions snappily, reacting, not reflecting. Empathy requires the 'skills of facilitation and appropriate intervention'

(Bingley 2003,341) that go beyond everyday awareness. I am also intrigued by how far empathic psychic space of a (research) relationship can stretch as feelings 'grow' or 'develop' beyond meetings through dreams, reflecting, writing and relating experience to others. Places and people affect me, move me (who am I again?) and these feelings are tricky to interpret in a meaningful way.

This brings me to the challenge of analysis. Feelings that develop in a research relationship somehow affect my understanding and writing when it comes to the academic practices of creating meaning and knowledge, but I am not sure how and am ill equipped to be particularly rigorous on this matter. Whilst more confident regarding the analysis of words and images, I am much less sure of how to make sense of my experiences. Much of my analysis also happens after the event as I write a research diary or work though transcripts and texts (Crang, 2001; Crang and Cook, 2007; Wiles et al., 2005). This is a very different approach to what happens in a psychotherapeutic context, where, as Bondi (2005) writes, subjects themselves are understood as having the answers and analysis is worked through in therapeutic situ with subjects. Therapeutic relationships also extend over a much longer period of time than those created within the time-pressured frame of academic research, which is often dictated by the needs of funding bodies. Although feminist geographers have been critical to developing inclusive practices designed to ease the power relations that mediate research (Townsend et al. 1999), this is somewhat different to analysis that happens in a psychotherapeutic setting. Analysing words is tricky enough, involving experience and feelings makes it harder still. How do (or should) I explore emotion and feelings in the moment? How do I handle them later - as part of data analysis? Also, what I seek is a process that enables me to explore, for example, why I focus on what I do and why I remember and write about particular moments of fieldwork (and not others). This means developing practices that

explore how our fantasies and defences affect fieldwork, analysis and writing (Walkerdine, et al. 2002; Lucey, et al. 2003).

Conclusions, continuing connections

To conclude, Bondi's (2005) paper has given me some insight regarding relational dimensions of emotion and the significance of my experience for meaningful research. Through her focus on psychotherapy's theory of practice, she has also given me an idea of what is expected of me to be 'emotionally present'. Where I want the conversation to continue is how to do this. How do I be myself when I am not sure of myself (especially as research can be so moving)? What does being non-judgemental involve? What, regarding empathy, do I take from a therapeutic context into a research situation? How do I reflect on my experience and feelings in a research context? What do my feelings do to my respondents?

As I stated at the start of this paper, I am not sure that I should expect answers, but what I would like is space to work through these issues for the sake of my research. I like the idea of short courses, support networks, reading group meetings filtering through geography, encouraging virtual connections and face-to-face conversations. This paper pursues a desire to keep the conversation going.

Elsewhere research experiences and feelings are explored through collective scholarship (Thomson 2006; Walkerdine et al. 2001). Liz Bondi's (2005) focus on my analysis of a moment of fieldwork revealed the pitfalls of being left alone with emotions and feelings (see Bennett 2005). Similarly, different interpretations of the focus group experience presented in this paper are inevitable because of defences and unconscious processes that have not been explored. Outside geography, researchers demonstrate the importance of

collective scholarship as groups and teams of individuals prepare for their research and explore their different interpretations of the same data (Walkerdine et al.2002; Hollway 2006). The point of such collective scholarship is not to necessarily reach agreement, but to explore and explain how interpretation is reached. Although I have had some good experiences of team research, the collective scholarship required to explore feelings and relationality needs a level of trust between group members that is beyond the usual. How to develop such trust in a team and support it with appropriate practices is new territory for many geographers.

Sometimes research teams employ psychotherapists to help researchers explore their feelings and experiences before, during and after the research. This is because the research might feel particularly painful, such as research that explores the financial implications of a death of a child (Corden et al., 2005). At other times, it is considered a necessary part of studies exploring the experience of researchers as part of the project (Hollway 2006). Whilst such support helps the researchers (with their research), I am concerned about interviewees left alone with feelings created in, for example, a focus group. Sometimes research relationships might feel beneficial or even therapeutic to interviewees (Bondi, 2003b), but perhaps not always.

What was the lasting impact of my focus group work on Sam? I'm not sure, but I have seen her since. In the final stage of the research the Northern Fells Group and I arranged an event at a local venue, inviting research participants to comment on an early stage of data analysis. Sam attended. It was a relief to see her again, and, after the evening's activities, I had a chance to chat to her. We talked about a few things and then I apologised for how our group meeting had ended, that it might have ended too quickly for her. I wanted to talk more about that focus group meeting, but I didn't. Whilst I still

find my feelings regarding the focus group meeting difficult to explain and understand, I do feel that, as a consequence of seeing her again, I've been able to reflect on them. Something that felt too uncomfortable before. I hope Sam feels similar.

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