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**Layering the wounded self: Using a pluralistic qualitative approach  
to explore meaning-making around self-injury**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper shows how a study using a pluralistic qualitative design explored the meaning-making process taking place around repetitive self-injury. By combining three interpretative lenses (interpretative phenomenological analysis, narrative analysis and psychosocial analysis), the researchers were able to develop a rich, multi-layered understanding of one individual's experience of the behaviour. However the project also raised significant methodological and epistemological issues. In the present review, we hope to illustrate the value of qualitative pluralism as a mixed methods approach enabling researchers and scientist-practitioners to engage more deeply with the subjective meanings attached to severe emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Though a relative newcomer, qualitative pluralism is becoming firmly established as one of a broad family of mixed methods approaches. Qualitative pluralistic approaches assume that people's experiences are multidimensional, and that achieving a more holistic understanding of the way these experiences are described requires the adoption of multiple theoretical and methodological frameworks (Frost & Nolas, 2011; Chamberlain, Cain, Sheridan & Dupuis, 2011). The way these approaches can indeed bring out the manifold facets of individual experiences, and do this with methodological rigour, has been amply illustrated (e.g., Burck, 2005; Frost, 2009; Willig, 2012). Yet their use to explore individual sense-making around severe emotional and behavioural difficulties remains limited. The present paper shows how a study using a pluralistic qualitative design explored the complex phenomenon of repetitive self-injury. In the process it considers the methodological and epistemological challenges encountered, and emphasises the value of a pluralistic qualitative approach for all 'scientist-practitioners'.

### **Self-injury: a behaviour with multiple meanings**

Self-injury is a complex and multidetermined behaviour influenced by a wide range of biological, psychological, social and cultural factors, something that theories and measures of non-suicidal self-injury are only beginning to address (Nock, 2009). Should an encompassing model or universal theory of the behaviour ever be developed, its usefulness for therapeutic practice could still be questioned given the highly individual meaning attached to his or her self-harming by each client. Such meaning might have to be discovered anew in each therapeutic encounter (Turp, 2002). One way to overcome some of the limitations of traditional research methods and capture this highly individualised behaviour in order to inform clinical practice might be to develop a more holistic framework when collecting data

from service users (Warner & Spandler, 2012). Another might be to cross different interpretative lenses, so as to create a multidimensional picture of the phenomenon.

The focus of the present project, undertaken as part of a counselling psychology doctoral programme, was on the individual meaning of self-injury, and more precisely the ways in which someone engaging in repetitive self-injury may make sense of her experience.<sup>1</sup> Using the term ‘make sense’ opened up not one but several lines of enquiry, including for instance: phenomenological (making sense of the lived experience of self-injury ‘in the moment’); autobiographical (making sense of the self-harming behaviour in the context of one’s history); and constructionist (making sense of self-injury in the context of broader social, political or cultural paradigms). One could also distinguish between making sense to self and to others; and between making sense deliberately and making sense unintentionally (the latter involving, for instance, unconscious dynamics). Rather than emphasizing one reading of the meaning-making process taking place around self-injury, the project set out to explore several of these dimensions, hoping ultimately to juxtapose them and to provide a new, multi-layered understanding of the experience of self-injury.

### **Crossing interpretative lenses**

In practice, this meant analysing the same interview material using three different qualitative ‘lenses’ - interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), narrative analysis and a psychosocial approach - in the hope that these different approaches might create distinct yet complementary layers of meaning around the participant’s self-injurious behaviour. Three interviews lasting between one hour and one hour and a half were carried out at weekly

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth acknowledging here that an emphasis on ‘making sense’ can be seen as problematic. Frosh (2007) in particular argues that qualitative researchers may need to capture and reflect both the fragmentation of subjective experience and the limitations of language.

intervals with Tina, a woman with a long and ongoing history of repetitive self-injury. They were transcribed in full in the fortnight following the last interview.

A rigorous approach was then followed for each of the interpretations, to allow for a replication of the procedures. The IPA reading of the transcript largely followed the suggestions of Smith and his associates (2009), adapting them to suit the demands of a single case. Selecting a narrative lens proved a lengthier process given the diversity of methods and foci of interest typical of the narrative approach. The final decision was informed not only by the research question but also by the textual data collected, and by the potential contribution of a narrative turn to the overall interpretative work within this context. Focusing on the linguistic properties of the narrative seemed important, and after a careful re-reading of the text a long, temporally-ordered narrative episode was selected for detailed structural analysis, using Gee's (1991) approach. In addition, the overall form or type of Tina's narrative would be tentatively interpreted so as to better frame the personal significance of her experience of self-harm in the context of her life story (Frank, 1995).

Finally, using a psychosocial approach required that a set of psychoanalytically-informed theoretical concepts be selected, a choice that would carry considerable implications in epistemological and methodological terms. After careful consideration, a Kleinian reading of the text was chosen (Hollway & Jefferson, 2012). This stance would be compatible with that of contextual constructionism underpinning the project as a whole (see below), thus enabling a triangulation, maybe even an integration of the readings. A dual focus on Tina's family dynamics and on transference/countertransference between interviewer and interviewee might also open up new vistas of interpretation.

## **Findings**

Lack of space prevents us from doing justice to the wealth of insights produced by thus combining several analytical lenses. However the following should give the reader a sense of the gradual interpretative layering that took place around Tina's account of her experience of self-injury. It also speaks to the contribution of each approach to the overall picture.

### *Interpretative phenomenological analysis*

The IPA interpretation produced a complex account of Tina's subjective experience. In an effort to make sense of her self-harm she seemed to weave together several strands of meaning: a descriptive strand, in which she sought to describe and explain the behaviour itself; a first contextual strand, in which she related her self-harm to the distress that sat 'underneath', itself a reflection of what she constructed as her fragile self; a second contextual strand, this time querying the ways both her self-harm and the underlying distress might be linked to her experience of the 'other'; a third, more historical strand where she explored the impact of her early life and experiences with her family of origin; and finally a meta-cognitive strand, in which she reflected on her growing understanding of, and ability to verbalise, her experience of self-harm (see Box 1).



*Box 1. Making sense of self-harm: superordinate themes*

- 1. Self-harm as a way of managing life**
- 2. What's underneath: the fragile self**
- 3. What's underneath: experiences of the other**
- 4. What's underneath: experiences of the family**
- 5. Developing a new understanding of self and self-harm**

While these five strands could be presented as distinct superordinate themes, they were closely intertwined in practice. Exploring Tina's meaning-making process around self-harm therefore meant balancing the need for interpretative themes with that to respect the layered nature of her material. The result was an analysis in which aspects of her experience were outlined within a particular theme and then revisited in the light of another, as a fuller understanding gradually emerged. For instance, the theme of control seemed to cut across several superordinate themes: self-injury helped Tina through life ('it's the only thing I can control'); it was often triggered by the experience of being 'out of control' ('all those things going on in my head'); and it was tied in with Tina's experience of the 'other' ('everybody else had control'), and of the family ('I have to be in contact with my parents, and pretend that everything is ok'). Overall this first reading of Tina's account produced a rich, intricate picture of her sense making around self-harm, one which resonated with much of the existing literature yet, as befitted its phenomenological intent, brought out her individual subjective experience.

*Narrative interpretations*

Gee's (1991) linguistic approach to the text, with its close attention to structure and prosody, provided a further reading around Tina's narrated experience of self-injury, this time focusing on a single episode (when she shot herself). At times this reading seemed to echo the IPA

interpretation, where self-harm had already been presented as a way to achieve control over life and as a means to communicate distress. However the detailed interpretation of one highly significant episode also focused attention on new elements. One was the importance of social connection or disconnection: Tina's act of self-harm was framed as the direct result of losing touch with family and friend and finding herself alone, an experience she both described and embedded into the text (e.g., through her choice of psychological subjects, 'I gradually becoming the only point of reference). The act of shooting herself became a dramatic call for attention and help, albeit one that she ultimately could not face up to, keeping her eyes shut even as she was being rescued.

The richness of this single episode of self-injury was also noteworthy. Within its 24 stanzas it encompassed a complex account of Tina's actions and reactions, one which blended external circumstances and inner experiencing in making sense of her act. In Tina's narrative self-shooting became a way to affirm mastery (over fear) and effect impact (on others); however it could also be read as a response to a lack or loss of intimacy, a desperate attempt to make others notice and empathise. The narrative also exposed the futility of Tina's actions: eventually she lost control over her body and senses, and ended up mired in guilt and regret. Both the inner logic and the self-defeating nature of Tina's act were thus given a powerful expression, one that Gee's approach rigorously articulated.

Using Frank's (1995) illness narratives as heuristic devices took the interpretative work in a different direction: no longer seeking to identify overarching themes, or to pick up linguistic and prosodic clues, but placing her account of self-injury within a broader meaning-making process, one concerned with her overall sense of self. Frank's respectful emphasis on the intertwining of threads in illness stories was especially valuable. In Tina's narrative, like

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indeed in most stories of illness and the self, restitution, quest and chaos seemed to alternate; self-harm was therefore imbued with a plurality of meanings: barometer of emotional health and physical integrity; living (and bodily) testimony of distress and survival; self-defeating attempt at controlling the uncontrollable. Recognising these different meanings, and how they fitted with Tina's understanding of her mental distress and life story, shed a different light on her experience of, and sense-making around, self-harm. The fact that Tina was still self-injuring at the time of the interviews was also worth bearing in mind. The way she held contrasting narratives in tension was a reflection of her struggle to reconcile her new understanding of and greater control over self-injury with her enduring emotional difficulties.

Additional insight was gained by paying attention to the response different narrative voices may elicit in the listener. On several occasions during the interviews the first author unwittingly ignored Tina's chaotic narrative and encouraged her to construct a more optimistic picture of her self-harm and her inner world. In so doing she may have emulated past listeners, whether clinicians or significant others, who could not tolerate the intensity and disjointedness of Tina's experience and in their denial merely confirmed that she could not be heard. By bringing in the dialogic dimension of the narrative, Frank's approach thus laid out the contribution of the 'other' (including the researcher) to the meaning-making process, and how it may constrain the production of a narrative as well as enable it.

### *Psychosocial analysis*

The third reading of the text brought out its performative dimension, identifying Tina's discursive positions and repertoires and exploring their potential underpinnings using a combination of discursive and psychoanalytical lenses. Of particular interest was the way in which Tina seemed to construct a dual position for herself: capable and hard-working on the

one hand, out-of-control on the other, each pole a potential means to deflect criticism for her behaviour. Further readings suggested the two additional positions of scientist and child, possibly variations on the original split construction. Tina's meaning-making around self-injury seemed to be largely articulated around these positions: at times it was framed as an observable, almost mechanistic phenomenon (notably in her engineering metaphors); at times as an addiction; always as an externalised behaviour over which Tina had limited power, however hard she tried to understand and control it.

Possible motivations for Tina's constructions could first be searched in broader social discourses around self-injury and mental illness. Constructing self-harm as an irrepressible behaviour, and herself as rational and trying hard to cope, enabled Tina to counter views of self-injury as the wilful, self-serving and manipulative act of a 'crazy' person. Like other illness narratives her account thus seemed to function, at least in part, as a defensive disclaimer (Horton-Salway, 2001). Her carefully chosen words, her appeals to science, her efforts to separate her younger self from her new mature and enlightened self all seemed to contribute to this effort. It is worth noting that the researcher was fully involved in this process, not only orienting Tina to specific aspects of her experience but also representing the 'other' she needed to convince.

However bringing in psychoanalytical concepts added another dimension to this interpretation of Tina's discursive moves and outlined, albeit tentatively, some of the unconscious dynamics underpinning her sense-making around self-harm. An exploration of her childlike positioning emphasized the helplessness behind her self-injury, and the way in which the act might reflect a failure of containment, a literal 'spilling out' of blood and emotions (Gardner, 2001). The analysis also suggested that Tina's self-harm might fulfil a

critical, but seemingly unconscious, communicative function: to express her primal, unspeakable emotional needs in such a compelling way that others would have no choice but to come to her rescue, enabling her at last to fully surrender to their care. Last, a closer look at Tina's discursive constructions around anger and guilt revealed that both might be central to her behaviour and this in ways she did not show awareness of. Her self-injury became both site and symbol of a struggle between life-enhancing and destructive instincts. The same unconscious dynamics could be called upon to further explain Tina's discursive efforts to free herself from blame. Object relations theory thus enriched the interpretation by allowing a deeper understanding to emerge, understanding that was nonetheless grounded in textual analysis.<sup>2</sup>

### **Pluralism revisited**

Using a pluralistic design to explore Tina's meaning-making around self-injury proved hugely rewarding: as the picture grew, layer by layer, we found ourselves revisiting many of the assumptions around self-harm that we had developed as researchers and clinicians. The work also brought out the complexity of the communications taking place between researcher and participant, and pointed to the role within of the former, whether as an active interviewer or as a passive 'other'. However this approach also posed serious challenges.

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<sup>2</sup> As did the incorporation of countertransference insights, though lack of space prevents a fuller discussion here.

*Holding several methodological approaches in tension*

The first one was of course the need to achieve a sufficient degree of proficiency in using what effectively turned out to be five different analytical procedures. But the work also called for a considerable degree of methodological reflexivity: enough needed to be known about each approach to design a coherent project and gather suitable data, rich in here-and-now experiencing and historical/biographical details. Yet it also seemed important to maintain some degree of ignorance so as to engage with each approach fully and on its own terms when the time came, and not prejudge their contribution or possible shortcomings.

In the end, efforts were made to ensure that every aspect of the data collection, from recruitment to transcription, would factor in the textual requirements of the different analyses to be carried out. Further, each of the decisions surrounding the design and implementation of the project was weighted with an eye to its possible impact on the interpretative work, and carefully documented to guarantee integrity (Williams & Morrow, 2009).

The sequence to be followed was also given due consideration. IPA was used first, narrative analysis second and psychosocial analysis last, in an effort to protect potential phenomenological insights from ‘contamination’ by more constructed, theory-led interpretations. Breaks were arranged between segments of interpretative work so that the analyst could return to the text with (relatively) fresh eyes. Last, all three interviews were approached as a block, the researcher only moving to another interpretative lens once she was satisfied that sufficient meaning had been extracted from the whole series. This was to preserve the coherence of Tina’s overall narrative, as elaborated over a relatively short span of time (three weeks); and to remain ‘in approach’ throughout each cycle of analysis.

*The risk of epistemological dissonance*

A second challenge concerned the very real risk of dissonance between three epistemologically distinct approaches. Whereas IPA and narrative analysis attempt to illuminate further the meaning already offered by the participant, thus gaining a richer understanding of the phenomenon being considered, the psychosocial approach, in line with its discursive and psychoanalytical grounding, seeks to look ‘under the skin’, to explain what is ‘really’ going on (Hollway & Jefferson, 2005). The epistemological position underlying each approach therefore required careful consideration.

So did the adoption of an overall stance which, we felt, would give the work more coherence and help guide methodological and interpretative choices. Tina’s account of her experience would be shaped by language, history and culture, as would our analysis of it, making direct access to ‘how it was for her’ an illusory pursuit. But the interpretative work was nonetheless expected to produce some insight into her subjective experience of self-injury, and most importantly, her sense-making around it.

The position adopted was therefore one of contextual constructionism: assuming that knowledge is necessarily local, provisional and situational, but that there is such a thing as a phenomenon, and that the same phenomenon can be fruitfully approached by using different perspectives (Madill, Jordan & Shirley, 2000). Crucially, as contextual constructionism sees all accounts as imbued with subjectivity, alternative interpretations need not invalidate each other. However this stance requires that the researcher finds some grounding for her results, either in the participant’s account or, adopting a position closer to that of critical realism, in the social practices that produce the account. Here we took pains to return to the text time and

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again, using it to ground the interpretation and make it as intelligible and honest as we could.

Multiple quotes were also drawn from the interviews, so the reader could engage with the accuracy of the interpretation more fully.

Because contextual constructionism views the researcher's input into the interpretative work as being context-dependent itself, considerable attention was also paid to personal reflexivity.

Preconceptions regarding the functions and meanings of self-injury, and how the behaviour may tie in with the symptoms and aetiology of borderline personality disorder (with which Tina had been diagnosed), were held in awareness throughout the IPA work and beyond.

Because of their explicit concern for the dialogical and performative elements of the text, narrative and psychosocial approaches further required an in-depth reflection on the researcher's potential input in the interviewing process.

For the first author, reflexivity also meant remaining aware of her own distinct identity as a middle-aged, middle-class, white French mother of two trying to make sense of another woman's experience. A reflexive journal was used to record immediate thoughts and experiences throughout the project. In addition to meeting one of the key requirements of the psychosocial approach, with its emphasis on transference and countertransference between interviewer and interviewee, this enabled a better delineation of the researcher's own material, so it could be kept separate from that being contributed by Tina; taking the analyses back to a vulnerable participant one year on would have raised significant methodological and ethical issues. Keeping a journal also allowed a reflection on the research process itself, with its complex methodology.



*The issue of validity*

Last, validity needed to be considered. Though well established in psychological research, and eminently compatible with each of the interpretative approaches selected, single case studies are still seen as lacking external validity. Yet case-centred analysis uniquely allows for the exploration of the many facets of subjective experience around a given phenomenon (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Given the research question the ideographic method seemed highly appropriate, and the attention paid to reflexivity and transparency throughout the project helped ensure the trustworthiness of its findings.

So did the coherence of the interpretations offered, both individually and together. At the onset of the project it was anticipated that each of the interpretative lenses used would produce a different picture of what repetitive self-injury meant to the participant. Using the IPA lens would produce phenomenological insight: a ‘fresh’, here-and-now take on the quality, meaning and significance of the lived experience of self-harm as offered by the interviewee and understood by the researcher. The narrative analysis would, it was hoped, contribute a reflection on the role of language and sequencing in meaning-making, by showing *how* the experience of self-injury had been structured and conveyed to become part of the participant’s life story. Last, the psychosocial work would combine a discursive and a psychoanalytical reading of the text to produce a ‘thick’ interpretation articulating past events and current self- or other-positioning (Gough, 2009)

Whether the three pictures thus drawn would complement or challenge one another remained an open question however, and a crucial one. For instance, the very process of ‘revealing’ underlying dynamics through a psychosocial reading might end up undermining the more

immediate engagement with the participant's meaning-making that characterises IPA. More generally, the cornucopia of qualitative insights thus generated might confuse rather than help the clinician trying to form a richer understanding of self-harm as experienced by his client, calling into question the pragmatic value of combining different interpretative strategies (Williams & Morrow, 2009).

However the picture of Tina's sense making around her self-injurious behaviour proved both rich and coherent. Each of the three paradigms delivered distinct and often thought-provoking interpretations. Further, in addition to providing a measure of methodological triangulation (cf. for instance the cross-analytical centrality of issues around control and mastery), the layering of these different approaches created a tapestry of insights, many of which were reflected across interpretations. As for the pragmatic validity of the research, i.e. its usefulness to others, feedback from colleagues working with self-harming individuals has so far proved encouraging. However only time will tell whether the multidimensional picture of meaning-making around self-injury presented here proves of interest to other researchers or clinicians, and affords those affected by the behaviour a richer understanding of its individual complexity (Riessman, 2008).

## **Conclusion**

As was shown above, qualitative pluralism places heavy demands on the researcher in terms of reflexivity (see also Nolas, 2011). Yet it also possesses definite strengths and deserves greater recognition as one important approach to mixed methods research, notably among 'scientist-practitioners'. First, combining different methodologies and sets of epistemological claims can allow for multidimensional understandings to emerge. This could be especially

valuable when exploring the sort of topics devoid of consensus around ontological status so prevalent in the field of psychopathology (Frost & Bowen, 2012). Second, pluralistic qualitative approaches seem to offer a middle ground between prescriptive methodological blueprints and fluid, 'methodology-free' research (Chamberlain, 2012); a way for even relatively inexperienced qualitative researchers to let their creativity and curiosity follow their course without sacrificing methodological rigour. Third, qualitative pluralism resonates with counselling psychology's pluralistic orientation, and as such ought to have a place among the array of methodological options presented in doctoral training programmes. Last, qualitative pluralism offers a multifaceted way to engage with subjectivity and meaning-making. It can deepen the way one thinks about the lived experience and its communicability, and as such may have particular value for those engaged in therapeutic work.

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