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# **Did We Fail? (Counter-)Transference in a Qualitative Media Research Interview**

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## **Abstract**

Drawing on Joke Hermes' (2006) account of a troubling interview, this article reproduces and reflects on passages from a qualitative interview with a user of a social networking site that was experienced as uncomfortable by both interviewee and interviewer (myself). The psychoanalytic concept of (counter-)transference is used to analyse the possible processes that led to the emergence of two narratives by the interviewee and interviewer and resulted in an unsuccessful research encounter. It is suggested that the analysis of the interview narratives may contribute to Wanda S. Pillow's (2003) notion of an 'uncomfortable reflexivity'. It may further add to methodological discussions of the interview in media research by placing an emphasis on a complex theory of the subject and intersubjective dynamics.

**Keywords** (counter-)transference, qualitative interview, reflexivity, discomfort, psychoanalysis.

## **Introduction**

The relationship between interviewee and interviewer in qualitative research has often been reflected on. Sonia Livingstone (2010) has noted that the interview played a pivotal role in the history of media audience research in particular. Over the past decades, not only has the interview risen to prominence in the social sciences in general but it has had a distinct influence in shaping the way audience research was and is carried out within media and communication studies. Not only did the terms

used to denote the interviewee change over time ('subject', 'respondent', 'participant', 'informant', 'user' and so on), but the style of interviewing changed from 'doing research on' to 'doing research with' (Livingstone 2010: 566) people. It was cultural studies and feminist research in particular that led to more dialogical approaches to interviewing in media studies. The ultimate asset of the interview here is that it enables ordinary people to speak and narrate their ways of responding to and making sense of a media text or medium. Schrøder, Drotner, Kline and Murray define the interview as 'a vehicle for bringing forward the media-induced meanings of the informants' lifeworld' (Schrøder et al. 2003: 143).

Any research encounter and the interview in particular may be structured according to dialogue and equal modes of expression. It is, however, still often motivated by the researcher's desire to find out about a particular individual's thoughts and ways of relating to a media text – not the other way round. This has come to the fore in a field like fan studies, where many academics are also fans of the content they wish to explore (e.g. Hills 2002). Joke Hermes (2006) notes that it was especially feminist research (e.g. Winship 1987, Drotner 1994, Ang 1995) that paved the way for such reflexive and auto-ethnographic modes of analyses that are more common today. Feminist writers often acknowledged that they were or are highly invested in the media content they studied, len Ang's pleasure in *Dallas* for example (Hermes 2006: 155). While research encounters today may be of a more equal nature, the question of true equality and dialogue is still on the agenda, as Hermes writes: 'The impetus behind audience research is precisely motivated by the wish not to speak on behalf of others even though, as a researcher, one does exactly that' (Hermes 2006: 156-157). How can such a dilemma be negotiated? Sometimes the speaking on behalf of or even with others may lead to troubling or uneasy consequences as this article highlights.

In her chapter 'Feminism and the Politics of Method' (2006), Hermes offers reflections on a particular interview situation. I discuss them briefly because they offer a rare insight into a media studies interview that did not go well. As part of her research project on readers of crime fiction, she and an assistant interviewed a group of three people. It seems that Hermes was primarily baffled by the group's thoughts on crime fiction that were in complete opposition to the research team's:

My own frustration was with how they ridiculed some of my questions, as well as my opening statement in which I tried to point to the difference between high and low culture and the difficult position of crime fiction in the middle. In making these remarks, I had hoped to break the ice and relieve my guests (the interview was at my home address) of any feelings of unease. My question met with near derision. (Hermes 2006: 160)

She goes on to describe how the group vehemently disagreed with her questions concerning the status of crime fiction as 'low' culture. Instead, the group thought of their favourite crime fiction as literature of a high cultural standing.

We, the interviewers, were obviously the barbarians to whom such distinctions needed to be explained, or worse, who were trying to talk them into being readers of trash with all its suspect pleasures. (Hermes 2006: 161)

Hermes interprets the interview situation (like other interviews in the same project) as one of 'impression management' (Goffman 1959) of a particular 'group of powerful informants' (Hermes 2006: 161). One may read a disappointment about the

interview's proceeding in those lines and the irritation of being faced with contradicting narratives is likewise comprehensible.

Hermes reflects on the opening statement made in the actual interview and whether she might have been perceived as 'arrogant' and 'middle-class' (Hermes 2006: 164) by the group. She concludes: 'It could well be the case that my fears of having imposed myself or my own interpretive framework prevented me from seeing how my "populist" defense was also a provocation' (Hermes 2006: 164). Hermes' account is telling of implicit power relations that may emerge in the dynamics of an interview. The interviewer is not always in control of how their questions are interpreted by research participants. Particularly her usage of the words 'barbarians', 'imposed' and 'defense' suggest a passionate investment in the research project and a researcher who expresses some deferred dissatisfaction about a particular interview. The interview bears some similarities to one that I conducted. Both Hermes and I said something that – with hindsight – may have been perceived as a provocation by interviewees and felt equally provoked or irritated by some of the interviewees' narratives. Such a provocation and other things that are said by the researcher and the interviewee(s) in the interview are uttered in response to the psychodynamics and relationalities between two or more people. These dynamics are further explored below by taking my own interview as a case study.

While there exist ample reflective accounts and guidelines on what it means to do ethical and dialogical audience research, few scholars have openly communicated and reflected on cases where audience research went wrong or was dissatisfactory. Seiter (1990) famously discussed her encounter with two male soap opera fans that she experienced as troubling. As noted, Hermes (2006) details a particular interview with crime fiction fans but it seems that audience research generally is very much focussed on showing 'positive' results and highlighting the things that 'worked' for the

researcher(s). This might be a strategic response seen in light of neoliberal constraints. University, industry or government funded research must be useful, demonstrate so-called 'impact' and show findings in a clear and coherent manner. Cases that slip through the cracks have no place in such scholarship. This article advocates a little more openness and honesty on part of media researchers who study audiences (perhaps qualitative researchers in general).<sup>1</sup> What about frustrating or contradictory interviews? What about interviews that for whatever reason did not work? Perhaps there is also shame or embarrassment at stake if such findings were to be disclosed and researchers might fear that colleagues could frown upon their practices.

This article discusses a case study of a qualitative interview with a middle aged woman. The interview project was about middle aged to elderly users of a particular social networking site (the German website *Feierabend.de*) and their reasons for using it. It also included questions on their specific actions on the social networking site and their Internet use in general. The project made use of open ended, semi-standardised questions and loosely drew on Kleining's qualitative, 'heuristic social research' (Kleining 1995, Krotz 2005).<sup>2</sup> I will focus on this singular case because it illustrates how research can, at times, go in different directions than intended by the researcher. All quotations are taken from the verbatim transcript and translated from German to English by the author. I argue that it is the psychoanalytic concept of 'transference' that may help to think about and reflect on the dynamics and utterances of the particular interview at hand. It is particularly transference's focus on unconscious processes that may be rendered conscious through afterward reflection that makes it a concept that may enrich the category of reflexivity. I firstly introduce the psychoanalytic concept of transference. I then reproduce and discuss some passages from the interview itself.

## **Defining Transference**

Research informed by psychoanalysis stresses the idea that 'unconscious processes infiltrate the narrative accounts given by research participants, so that interpretive strategies aimed at uncovering these unconscious processes will be needed' (Frosh 2010: 200). This sentence does not mean that the researcher can somehow infer where the unconscious or its processes lie in a data corpus. Instead, it may be actual responses, utterances or silences on part of an interviewee or interviewer that may tell something about underlying unconscious processes or may denote a process where something unconscious has been rendered conscious through free associative thought.

Such moments are often signalled [sic] by gaps, inconsistencies, unusual or disjointed language, narrative leaps and abrupt changes of subject; but they are also to be found in episodes or remarks whose emotional tone or resonance feels in some way distinctive.

For example, they may be troubling, cause confusion, provoke irritation or seem oddly affectless. (Bereswill et al. 2010: 239)

Fundamentally, the concept of transference is about such moments that point to unconscious processes. The two moments that are mainly discussed with regards to the interview were felt in an almost tangible manner by me during and after they had occurred.

Although there are other psychoanalytic concepts associated with transference, the focus in this article is on the notion of (Freudian) transference as defined by Laplanche and Pontalis. Transference can be understood as

a process of actualisation of unconscious wishes. Transference uses specific objects and operates in the framework of a specific relationship established with these objects. Its context par excellence is the analytic situation.

(Laplanche and Pontalis 1973: 455)

Transference is about a process, a shift, a transmission of desires, feelings and structures of relationships or modes of relating from the patient to the psychoanalyst. The notion of transference is about dynamics; it is about immediacy and about relations and interpersonal encounters. The idea of transference is key to the psychoanalytic session and its understanding, as Freud and many others argued, is fundamental to the treatment of the patient. However, transference does not only occur in the consulting room but can be observed in everyday interaction between individuals and, as will be shown, in research encounters as well (Racker 1968, Piotrowska 2013). It is in the consulting room that transference is subjected to thorough scrutiny and interrogated by the psychoanalyst and to some degree the patient alike. To that end, transference is not a category that denotes pathology or mental illness. It is a category that describes a specific mode of interpersonal relations. Sigmund Freud defined transference as the following:

What are transferences? They are new editions or facsimiles of the impulses and phantasies which are aroused and made conscious during the progress of the analysis; but they have this peculiarity, which is characteristic for their species, that they replace some earlier person by the person of the physician.

(Freud 1981a: 116)

Two points from this quote are crucial: transference is about feelings, ideas, impulses or fantasies that are initially unconscious but are made conscious; they are made known to the patient in the analytic session. These ways of relating, desires, fantasies or impulses relate to internalised structures of interpersonal relationships. Secondly, they actualise earlier ideas, feelings or attitudes towards a person in that person that is before the patient, e.g. the analyst. These structures of relationships are updated. They re-emerge in the analytic encounter. They mostly relate to our earliest relationships we have in our lives, between children and mother and father and possibly other persons who have a deep impact in the shaping of our subjectivity. Transference is about a (libidinal) investment, a high investment in another person or persons and this investment is placed in a different person in the act of the transference. Freud also called the phenomenon of transference a 'false connection', the patient equates a present experience with past ones and the transference kicks in (Freud 1981a, b).

Freud distinguished between good, or positive and negative transference. Positive transference is, for example, when loving relationships are transferred onto another person in an interpersonal encounter. However, cases of negative transference can also occur when disturbed or troubled relationships are unconsciously transferred. Freud also distinguished between transference and counter-transference. Transference occurs from patient to analyst and counter-transference: from analyst to patient. Transference happens involuntary, in the heat of the moment. Negative transference often relates to unconscious memories and transference may be used as a defence mechanism in order not to confront and deal with these memories. It is used to mask a (past) conflict (Freud 1981a, b).

For the analyst, transferences are very beneficial in getting to know the patient and their history and how specific patterns that relate to relationships are dominant in

their life. Laplanche and Pontalis noted that 'the transference becomes the terrain upon which the patient's unique set of problems is played out with an ineluctable immediacy' (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973: 458).

Sensing that transference has occurred and talking to the patient about it can help them. Understanding transference for psychoanalysis is about uncovering and discussing the history of a patient and their wider patterns of (past and present) relationships.

### **Why Transference?**

Why is the concept of transference useful in the context of qualitative research? What does it allow us to know? Can a clinical idea be applied to situations outside the clinic? Why should audience researchers care about transference?

To be sure, what is fundamentally different between the clinical transference and the non-clinical one, is that the latter may not be registered. The transference in the consulting room is to be registered and named by the psychoanalyst or patient, talked about and worked through, understood by the patient in order to learn more about their problems and ways of relating to other subjects. A revealed negative transference is about the possibility of acting differently, of not updating the old patterns and behaviours. As Freud put it: 'the transference becomes the battlefield on which all the mutually struggling forces should meet one another' (Freud 1981b: 454). This is not the task of audience research. In utilising transference one does not attempt to psychologise or pathologise the researcher or the research participant. The idea of transference may nonetheless be helpful in exploring certain interview dynamics.

Transference helps us to understand the complexity and depth of the human subject, - something that is rarely accounted for in media research (Dahlgren 2013, Krüger and Johanssen 2014). Transference is an epistemological tool that can help us to understand ourselves, our research participants and the research encounters in more detail and in a different light. It is about stepping back from the data and reflecting on our own behaviour as researchers and on that of our participants or respondents.

But there are some further similarities between the analyst-patient encounter and the researcher-participant encounter; both can be somewhat peculiar, both are driven by implicit power relations and desires. In the clinical encounter, it is the patient who has the desire to learn more about themselves from the analyst and themselves. There is trust and a hierarchy involved. In research, for example interview based research, the researcher has the desire to know more about the participant. This is very different from psychoanalysis in that the motives that made a specific research encounter possible are motives of the researcher, not the participant. Research is primarily driven, as Stephen Frosh and Lisa Baraitser (2008) argue, by the researcher's desire to know and this desire, as I show, can heavily influence how the researcher acts and talks. Likewise, the researcher can be perceived as someone who has expert knowledge on a subject matter and this might influence the research encounter.

Transference may be useful but it is not something that one should regard as allowing us as researchers to know the participant better because we can now 'read' their affective responses or spoken words in a different way. In fact, psychoanalysis as a project and transference in particular can alert us that there is no final knowledge.

## **An Example of Transference in Qualitative Research**

The specific example of a case of transference as well as counter-transference comes from research that involved semi-structured interviews with elderly people about their experiences of using a social networking site. Six interviews with other people had been conducted before I held an interview with a female, who was in her mid-sixties: Miss M.<sup>3</sup>

Up until the point of the interview, all people I had spoken to were very enthusiastic about using the Internet and interacting with others online. They told me and the other research group members that they had met new friends as a result of using the social networking site and its chat rooms. Some had even found new partners. There was generally a sense of happiness and enthusiasm towards the social networking site and the Internet in general that I remembered from these interviews. The interview started by me asking what Miss M thought of the Internet in general and she said that she thought it was 'great' (Miss M, line 3). At first I thought the interview was going to be along similar lines as the other interviews had been.

As the interview got under way, the atmosphere was very tense. Miss M's replies were very short and she seemed insecure and uneasy about the whole interview. She asked me repeatedly 'Is that what you want to hear?' (Lines 283-284), or she said 'I don't know what else you want to hear' (Line 624). These sentences may show the kind of power relation that is often involved in social research. From a psychoanalytic viewpoint one may argue that Miss M possibly came to the interview with the (unconscious) idea that I wanted to hear something in particular. She was talking because I desired it and, fundamentally, that I wanted to hear utterances that would relate to ideas, or hypotheses that I had in mind. Of course, I did not want to hear anything specific and I emphasised during the interview that she could openly talk about everything and that what I wanted to hear did and should not matter – at

least that is what I thought at the time. I will return to this point later on. I tried to establish a supportive atmosphere. One could already argue that there was a case of transference here. I was perhaps perceived by her as a figure with authority who was quite literally questioning her. I was asking questions relating to her as a subject and to her subjective experiences. In short, I had failed to establish an atmosphere that would make her feel at ease. After the interview, I had the feeling that I had interrogated her. I had the association that I was a sort of father figure and before me was a little girl. I experienced Miss M as very timid and inhibited. While I was the 'expert researcher' who was interested in Miss M's narrative, I did not want to come across as such but perhaps she had seen me as an authority figure. I was a male interviewer who interviewed a female and gender dynamics possibly played a role. In particular Miss M's past relationships to other men may have been (unconsciously) actualised and transferred (Hollway & Jefferson 2000). I had not managed to shake off an (unconscious) paternal attitude (Hermes 2006: 165). Issues of (culturally constructed) male authority might have played a role. I probed more in order to generate narratives. While I did not want to occupy the position of an interrogator, I was made to feel as one by Miss M's short answers and my repeated attempts to relieve her of uneasiness and to get her to talk more.<sup>4</sup> Was I to blame for the atmosphere? Did I fail? Did we both fail? But then had she not come to the interview? It was she who had answered the recruitment call. In being hesitant and insecure, she had perhaps already transferred old patterns of behaviour to me, possibly past modes of relating to others.

As the interview progressed, I had the impression that Miss M talked about aspects that she actually did not want to talk about. She talked about receiving a lot of messages from men on the social networking site, some were inappropriate and of a sexual nature. She had told me at the very beginning of the interview that she was

single and that her partner had died a few years ago. She talked about feeling lonely at times. She met with a few men she had met through the social networking site but these meetings were mostly disappointing. To her, it was an 'illusion' (Line 686) to think she could meet someone online. All these narratives were not specifically asked about by me but they were disclosed in response to very general questions about her life and usage of the Internet and the social networking site. While Miss M talked about her experiences, she did not seem comfortable sharing them.

I wondered if I had unwittingly prompted her to talk about things she felt uncomfortable talking about. After the interview with Miss M, I felt very insecure, weak and empty. I wondered why it had taken the course it had taken. Had I failed? Had I somehow contributed to an uneasy atmosphere that led to the emergence of uncomfortable narratives? Had we both failed because the chemistry was simply not right between us? Had she failed because she participated in the research but proved to be such an uncooperative interviewee?

I listened to the recorded interview many times and tried to feel what the recording did to me, what effects it had on me and came to the conclusion that transference and counter-transference played a heavy role in the interview. The dynamics of the interview may have led to a transference of Miss M's old patterns of relating to other men, to other researchers or knowledgeable experts. I had neither encouraged nor halted her narratives about her dating experiences but had possibly and unconsciously signalled a receptiveness of such narratives because as the dutiful researcher, I was out there to get, what Hermes calls, 'the real story' (Hermes 2006: 164). Of course, there are only fragments in reality and no real, coherent story can ever be reconstructed.

## **An Example of Counter-Transference**

At one point during the interview Miss M said the following:

Yeah, sometimes this [the social networking site] seems too stupid to me. You enter that chat room, I don't know if they are all very old in there, they write really stupid stuff. I can't say, just stupid words and they're enjoying that, completely stupid. [...] I can't really connect to that. (Lines 174-178)

This arguably testifies to the disappointment she felt as a result of the meetings with other men she had had. I felt that she was categorically dismissing the whole website. She equated it with stupidity and said that she could not really connect to it – unlike all other interviewees spoken to. This was a total contradiction and I, like Hermes, felt a pain in experiencing it. It 'is particularly painful to have the pillars of one's identity upset' (Hermes 2006: 162) in such a situation. I responded to this quote towards the very end of the interview:

With the other people that I have interviewed, they told me, they are very active, all of them that I have talked to and they have told me, or I had the impression, they are maybe a little lonely and now they have gotten to know a lot more people and they are meeting in real life, going out, travelling to other cities together. The chat room is very important to them, they all said so, a very important part of their lives. (Lines 705-711)

She reiterated her response that she could not get much from the website. I had not planned to respond in this way and it seems that I actually did want her to say something. I, unconsciously, wanted her to 'prove' my theory I had formulated,

involuntarily, based on the accounts by the other participants that I had heard before. I transferred these modes of relating to the previous interviewees and the experiences from them onto her. My unconscious desire for coherent and similar research data manifested itself in my statement. I (unconsciously) wanted her to 'verify' my research and she had not. The tone of my voice and how I said these sentences did indeed sound authoritarian and a little impulsive. After all, I had finally told her what I wanted to hear and in so far responded to her question she had asked a number of times in the interview.

This is an extreme example of counter-transference and of course something that should be avoided at all costs during the research encounter but subjectivity and agency are not as rational and easy as one may think. We sometimes cannot control ourselves. I really wanted to tell the research participant what previous participants had said and these narratives and how I related to them re-emerged at this point in the interview. This counter-transference is connected to Miss M's transference. She had asked me multiple times what I wanted to hear and I had now unconsciously responded. I had told her what I wanted to hear. Looking back, I could apparently not believe that her narrative was so different to those of the other interviewees and I transferred patterns and modes of relating to the other interviewees to Miss M. I wanted to probe if there was not a little bit of them in her. From an ethical point of view, I had committed a mistake. I had precisely fallen into what Sonia Livingstone characterises as 'a deceptively gentle approach that ensures the interviewee provides just what the interviewer requires in a manner far from the egalitarian power relations implied by the notion of *interview*' (Livingstone 2010: 566, italics in original). While I, as the researcher, am to blame for such an eruption, its emergence occurred as a result of the specific psychodynamics of the interview situation itself. I was irritated by the interviewee's questions of what I wanted to hear but more irritated by

my *own* failure of not being able to break the ice and establish rapport and a more amicable atmosphere, similar to Hermes experiences discussed earlier. In hindsight, I was also puzzled by the fact that Miss M had answered the recruitment call but was so crisp and had mostly dismissed and spoken negatively of the social networking site in the interview.

### **Beyond Reflexivity**

What is, if any, the benefit of such an interview? It offers scope for reflection on the wider dynamics that may exist in a research encounter and the power relations that may be reduced to a minimum but may still surface as a result of unconscious processes.

In any research setting, as Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2002) argue, there can be a particular impression on part of the researcher. They may feel that they are regarded in a particular way e.g. as a middle-class academic, as someone with authority, etc. This impression may be shared by the research participant but it can also be a fantasy held by the researcher. 'It is difficult to tell whether the researchers projected these positionings onto the participants, whether the participants projected them onto the researchers or whether they were mutually created' (Walkerdine et al. 2002: 187). There is no final way of knowing but one may reflect on these impressions nonetheless. 'It is by being aware of and listening to the different parts of our own fantasies, and to the place in us that responds to any given message, that allows us to tune in to the different meanings of our subjects' (Walkerdine et al. 2002: 190). To some degree, such questions are addressed through the category of reflexivity (Finlay and Gough 2003, Pillow 2003, Brown 2005). Frosh and Baraitser (2008) broadly express that reflexivity is related to a form of situated knowledge following a research encounter (e.g. an interview) which is not separate from the

situation, practices, utterances and psychodynamics that created it. It is this creation of knowledge that is reflected on by the researcher or research team: how did it come about? How did the researcher (and interviewee for example) feel during and after this creation? Reflexivity analyses the 'conditions of emergence of knowledge' (Frosh & Baraitser 2008: 358). It results in knowledge being made 'contingent, strategic and provisional' (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008: 358). Any knowledge must be regarded as 'temporally and interpersonally positioned' (Frosh & Baraitser 2008: 358). Reflexivity requires the researcher to critically think about themselves and what they bring to the research encounter, how categories like gender, class, and ethnicity might frame and angle the research process (Hollway & Jefferson 2000). It requires the researcher to think and listen to their own words and questions that were uttered and how they might have or might not have influenced a respondent's answer.

The transference / counter-transference mechanisms go beyond a mere sociological notion of reflexivity. They are more attentive to emotional and affective responses and, most importantly, carry a notion of the human subject that is often absent from accounts of reflexivity in social research. The ideas I have put forward in this article further complicate notions of reflexivity because they show that reflexivity is not some sort of universal tool that can simply be fetched from the researcher's epistemological shack at the back of their mind in order to make qualitative research more ethical. Reflexivity promises a kind of reassuring self-awareness that can eradicate any blind spots in a research project. Wanda S. Pillow (2003) defines such a use of reflexivity as one that has the purpose of comforting the researcher. She advocates 'uncomfortable reflexivity' (Pillow 2003: 188) instead: 'a reflexivity that seeks to know while at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous' (Pillow 2003: 188). Drawing on scholarship that exemplifies such reflexivity (Villenas 1996, St. Pierre 1997, Chaudhry 2000), Pillow argues that practices of reflexivity in research

must embrace the unfamiliar and experiences of failure in order to challenge interpretations and representations carried out by the researcher.

The qualitative research arena would benefit from more 'messy' examples, examples that may not always be successful, examples that do not seek a comfortable, transcendent end-point but leave us in the uncomfortable realities of doing engaged qualitative research. (Pillow 2003: 193)

Such an example was put forward in this article by making use of the transference – counter-transference terms. Frosh and Baraitser (2008) claim that reflexivity is commonly used in the social sciences in a kind of quick check manner that remains on the conscious level. It is psychoanalysis that may enrich reflexivity.

'A view which postulates that it is possible for researchers and subjects to be equal, becomes a fantasy' (Walkerdine et al. 2002: 191). Psychoanalysis may be helpful here because it provides a rich language with which to think about the responses and reactions and what is not said during an interview. A complex, psychoanalytically grounded reflexivity functions as a kind of monologue that is about the researcher's perceptions of a situation and its intersubjective dynamics. It is not a therapeutic session in which a 'patient' is talked to. Reflexivity should thus never be a tool of 'knowing the subject "better"' (Frosh & Baraitser 2008: 363) but a means of introspection. The concept of transference may help to shed more light on how such a psychoanalytic reflexivity might look like (Hollway & Jefferson 2000).

## **Conclusion**

This article provided an honest discussion of a singular interview that was experienced as uncomfortable by the researcher and the interviewee alike. While

there has been relatively little discussion in empirical media (audience) research on such experiences, I began the article by referencing Joke Hermes' (2006) example of a group interview session that left her dissatisfied. Her account offers a crucial reflection on the possibilities of why the interview went how it went. I would suggest that the experiences may possibly be analysed further by drawing on psychoanalysis, particularly because Hermes uses the word 'defense' (Hermes 2006: 164) to describe her statement and alludes thereby to a psychoanalytic term without exploring it more. Like Hermes, I interpreted my particular statement as being provocative and defensive. I would slightly disagree with Hermes when she says: 'Irritation is the last thing you need in audience research' (Hermes 2006: 161). It is the experience of feeling irritated that may open up space for reflections on the implicit theories of the subject within media methodology and research. The value for empirical media research lies in the reflections on the two particular interviews. What happened may not be undone but in writing about it, a particular emphasis is placed on research dynamics that are not foreseeable. It is psychoanalysis that may offer a specific perspective on such dynamics. Psychoanalysis 'argues for the importance of recognizing how difficult it is to stay in touch with the multifaceted and subterranean workings of the mind and fluctuating feelings we can have towards others [...]' (Brown 2006: 187). This article is therefore an invitation for other researchers to respond and share their experiences of uncomfortable research encounters as well as their responses to this piece.

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<sup>1</sup> The discipline of psychosocial studies includes detailed and reflective accounts of problematic or contradictory research encounters (e.g. Hollway & Jefferson 2000; Day Slater *et al.* 2009; Clarke & Hoggett 2009).

<sup>2</sup> The project was originally undertaken as part of an MA module on research methods at the University of Erfurt, Germany. Four interviews were conducted in total. My thanks go to Caroline Pohl and Arne Hellwig who jointly planned and carried out the research with me. The particular interview that forms the basis of this article was conducted by me alone.

<sup>3</sup> The name is a pseudonym.

<sup>4</sup> While I am from the western part of Germany, Miss M was born and lived in the eastern part. After the interview, questions about the relationship between West Germany and the former residents of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) occupied me. My manner of speaking clearly identified me as being from the West and underlying cultural dynamics may thus have contributed to the interview dynamics. I have no space here to further discuss these aspects and the possible gender dynamics that may have had an impact on the interview.