Introduction

This chapter introduces the concepts of scene and scenic understanding from Alfred Lorenzer, German cultural analyst and psychoanalyst in the Frankfurt tradition; concepts that are explicitly psycho-social and congruent with the psychoanalytically informed epistemology and methodology that has inspired my research practice. In this tradition, ‘Imagination is scenic in its format: it inter-relates all informative, sensual and situated impressions in holistic images’ (Salling Olesen, 2012, para 3).

I illustrate the value of the concept of scene in two interconnected research areas, namely, writing and analysing data. By ‘scene’, Lorenzer means ‘an affective and embodied register of meaning’ (Bereswill et al., 2010, p.225), so ‘scenic understanding’ refers to ‘a process by which researchers reflect on their affective and embodied experience of their data’ (Redman, Bereswill and Morgenroth, 2010, p.217). Lorenzer suggested that it was possible, through scenic understanding, to access a form of unsymbolised socio-cultural knowledge, a kind of societal-collective unconscious (Hollway, 2013a). I borrow his concept of ‘scenic understanding’ to inform the way I introduce a case as a ‘scenic composition’ (Froggett and Hollway, 2010), introducing readers to ‘Jenny’ and discussing the principles involved.

In Lorenzer’s work I found two of my central ambitions shared. First he aims to understand the complexity of subjectivity, seen not as an individual attribute but as an ‘embodied experience of interaction which has conscious and unconscious levels’ and ‘a relational and dynamic aspect of social interaction’ (Salling Olesen, 2012, para 1). Second, Lorenzer takes this view of subjectivity into ‘empirical studies of
social interaction in everyday life’ (ibid.). He used a ‘depth hermeneutic’ methodology (avoiding the label ‘psychoanalytic’ for applications outside the clinic) for the cultural analysis of texts. In this tradition the term culture serves to open up a perspective on ‘a social level of reality which is present both as an environment and as an embodied meaning of the individual’ (Salling Olesen, 2012, para 10, my emphasis). His concept of scenic understanding enables both the imaginative interpretation of personal meaning and – these are not separate – how the whole of a socio-cultural milieu is represented in the scene that is the subject of interpretation. At the beginning of this chapter, the summary of Lorenzer is about imagination as scenic, sensory, situated and holistic. His emphasis on imagination enabled me to link his approach to Winnicott’s theorisation of imagination (Hollway, 2011) and thus to build on and extend my familiarity with British object relations psychoanalytic treatment of an intermediate area of experience that is the basis for uncognised knowing (Hollway and Froggett, 2012).

As we shall see, writing scenically requires the emergence of what is known holistically. I contrast this with the use of social identity categories and discuss what might guide their ethical use. Likewise I discuss how to use and theorise language in a way that preserves the emotion therein. Scenic understanding, syncretistic perception and reverie are all viewed as drawing on a holistic, undifferentiated kind of knowing that does not split off intellectual understanding from feel-knowing or intuitive knowing. Connections with matrixial theory and with Bion’s treatment of knowing are easy to draw.

I have experimented with different writing styles (Hollway, 2011b), taking inspiration from diverse traditions. For example, Ted Hughes, English poet, discovered a form, ‘rough verse’, that best preserved ‘the fresh simple presence of the experience’. When, in his journal, he ‘happened’ to write in rough verse:

I discovered something that surprised me. In verse, not only did I seem to move at once deeper and more steadily into reliving the experience, but every detail became much more important.

(Hughes, 2008)

In my rough verse in Chapter 1, I wanted to preserve the ‘fresh simple presence’ of Juhana’s experience, not smooth it over with an expert researcher voice that risked losing its aliveness. I wanted to use her case data so that readers’ imaginations could conjure changing scenes throughout the year. In a different tradition, Laurel Richardson