

## Introduction:

### The various uses of intersubjectivity as an analytic tool

Marianne Vysma & Marian Tankink

This special issue of *Medische Antropologie* results from an annual symposium of the journal, which this year was held in January, 2007 and whose theme was 'Intersubjectivity as an analytical tool in anthropological research'. Both in writing the initial article for last year's journal, and in the symposium itself, and in reviewing the articles for the current issue, the concept of intersubjectivity reminded us of a trickster figure because every time we thought we had a working definition, the concept changed shape.

Although we were less aware of this at the time, it already started with our introductory article, where we defined intersubjectivity in two different ways:

Sometimes we use it as a noun, to indicate that symbolic space that is created when two subjectivities meet and a shared reality comes into being; when we use it in this way, by symbolic space we mean an emotional reality characterized by the conviction/sensation that the 'I' understands and is understood by the other. Sometimes we will use intersubjectivity as an adjective, to indicate the dynamic character of this symbolic space: intersubjectivity, as we will attempt to show, is something that – in the normal course of things – is lost and regained all the time (Tankink & Vysma 2006: 251).

It soon emerged that even this twin-definition was understood as being too narrow. In the various discussions at the symposium the participants slowly wove together a semantic network around the term intersubjectivity that included, among others, words like: subjectivity, reflexivity, introspection, empathy, understanding, performance, conscious/unconscious, power-relations, position, social roles (intersectionality), responsibility, embodiment, trans-subjectivity, transference and countertransference. The most common conundrum concerned the distinction between subjectivity and intersubjectivity.

Although we invoked the concept in terms of examining it as an analytic tool for anthropological research, we never wanted to focus solely on the researcher, because the core of intersubjectivity is that a narrative is co-created by the teller and the listener. But when one focuses on the concept as an analytic tool, then the focus does

shift to the researcher, because it is the researcher who uses it as a lens through which to analyse the interviews and other interactions.

However, to use it as a tool means among other things, to reflect on all the various aspects of the semantic network when analysing the raw anthropological data that has been gathered and to be able to become aware of what the researcher's part has been in the co-production. It is to understand what you yourself brought to the interaction and to transform this personal understanding into words that can be shared with one's peer community.

Intersubjectivity as an analytical tool is present along every step of the way of the anthropological research process. During the interviews, inter-corporeal intersubjectivity is most present. While reviewing and analysing the data in preparation for writing, the emphasis is on intra-psychic intersubjectivity. In the process of preparing the manuscripts for publication, the peer-reviewers reaction to the papers were necessary for the writers to convey the intersubjective experience of their research moments into words and sentences that could understood and shared in such a way that precisely covered the charged encounters. This would be part of the social intersubjectivity. We focus on this process using the concept intersubjectivity to highlight our contention that knowledge production is a co-creation along every step of the way: during the interviews between the subject of the researcher and the informant; during the review and analysis of the data between the person we were at the moment of the interview and our reflecting self; and in the actual writing process, between ourselves as researchers and the academic community of which we are part.

In the first article, Van der Geest questions whether or not it is possible to understand suffering and illness, by exploring the distinction between subjectivity and intersubjectivity. He examines how the subjectivity of the researcher constantly influences what s/he sees or experiences by taking a critical look at that most basic of anthropological stances: participant-observation. Van der Geest takes the medical sociologist Nijhof's experience with his own illness as an example. He ends by making two points: first, raising doubt whether it is at all possible to truly understand suffering without having suffered yourself; secondly, calling for reflexivity and modesty in our claims that we have 'captured' the other's point of view (and point of heart).

Huong and Akello both tackle the difficulties of reaching intersubjective understanding while doing anthropology at home. Each discusses in her own way how the very proximity to their research subjects and the shared subjectivities actually impeded rather than helped to come to anthropological insights. Huong, who does research on rape victimisation in Vietnam, describes how an appeal for approval by one of her informants, with whom she identifies but from whom at the same time she knows she differs radically, throws her into deep questioning about her role as researcher. Akello's paper is a much more a subjective reflection of the painful parts of her own past that she confronted during her research on child-headed households in Uganda.

Lindegaard describes how she used the concept of intersubjectivity as a prism through which to understand acts of violence adolescent boys in a South African prison. She describes how for her research it was necessary to let go the normative

categories of understanding violence and the roles that belong to those categories. This relinquishing of social roles was necessary not only in how she saw her informants, but also to resist in how her informants wanted her to see them.

Van Wijk describes a similar process but from the other side. She writes about two cycles of interviews, a year apart, with the same informant. In the initial cycle she was unwittingly pulled into taken the position her informant needed her to take, which was someone who was a victim of his own addictions and full of remorse. Upon her return and the reviewing of her notes and other information, she describes the process of recognition of having been pulled into the other's subjectivity and how she approaches the same informant in a different way upon her return to the field a second time.

Devisch uses Ettinger's feminine psychoanalytical perspective on 'matrixial borderlinking' to trace hidden layers and healing capacities in the (counter)transference and trans-subjectivity that are at play in the encounter of patient, healer and (medical) anthropologist. He advocates using the intersubjective perspective to explore the blind-spots in modern social science with regard to the invisible, the elsewhere, the untamed or the uncanny, as he describes his encounters with Yaka elders in South-Western Congo and Kinshasa.

Oomen et al. examine intersubjectivity using a case of Munchausen Syndrome as a point of departure. Munchausen is a disease in which a patient simulates illness symptoms in order to obtain medical attention, and they show how this eventually, after diagnosis of the disease, results in a total lack of intersubjectivity between doctor and patient because it destroys the trust necessary for a good working relationship. They give guidelines for medical anthropological empirical investigation of the fabrication of the disease by caregivers and patients.

Tankink describes the process of intra-psychic intersubjectivity as she discusses the inner confrontation with feelings called up by an informant's story during the analysis phase of her research. She shows that intersubjectivity between the researcher and the informant does not only occur in direct interaction but continues while the researcher digests the data in preparation for writing.

In a richly philosophical article, leavened by two vignettes detailing interactions between him and his informants, Jackson, who has written much on the subject of intersubjectivity, reflects on the "strange and profound" relationships forged during anthropological research conducted more than thirty years ago in Sierra Leone. In the first, he shows how sympathy can emerge out of a recognition between two people who share a sense of being on the margin of society: the child-like hopes of a young anthropologist to understand the unfamiliar environment in which he finds himself; and the millenarian dreams of a demented old man. In the second, he describes how friendship can grow – very slowly – out of sitting together mostly in silence and then waiting for the right moment to ask crucial questions. By way of these examples, Jackson insists that relationships, those of love and friendship (of which variety our most compelling research encounters surely are), are not intellectual endeavours, reached via dialogue and after shared understanding. He reminds us that, "what is striking about human interaction is that while it is seemingly dyadic, it invariably involves a third party, a shared goal, a common cause, whose presence is often shadowy or unspoken."

It is precisely this “shadowy presence” that we meant to explore when we raised the topic of intersubjectivity. In a response to our initial paper, during the symposium, Reis raised the critique that our approach was too cognitive. This was certainly unintended as we now believe that intersubjectivity concerns almost everything except cognition. Or rather, as these articles show, intersubjectivity, both when we seem to be part of it, and when we look back on it, gives us the experiences that form the raw data out of which we construct our cognitive positions.

## Note

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## Reference

Tankink, M. & M. Vysma

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