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## Creating art from research: a theatre play based on research interviews with senior therapists

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### ABSTRACT

The growing scope and influence of qualitative research methodologies has generated an interest in the use of art-informed approaches to disseminating research findings. In the present article, our aim is to present a methodological case study of the development of a theatre play based on a qualitative study of senior therapists' life and work. Lessons learned from this project are presented in relation to ethical issues, the process through which qualitative data are transformed into a theatre performance, and the distinctive perspective afforded by a dramaturgical approach. Implications for research practice are discussed.

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Public dissemination of knowledge from psychotherapy research is a topic that has received scant attention within the professional literature. Depictions of psychotherapy in successful TV productions such as *In Treatment* or *The Sopranos* reveal a substantial public interest in learning about psychotherapy. It seems likely that many members of the public possess an understanding of the efficacy of high-profile models of therapy such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), or the side-effects of anti-depressant medication. However, there is little evidence of media coverage of research studies that explore specific aspects of the process and outcomes of therapy.

Qualitative research that focuses on the stories and experiences of clients and therapists has the potential to play a key role in public dissemination of knowledge about psychotherapy. Qualitative research explores how meaning is constructed in individual lives and relationships between people, and within social groups and cultures (McLeod, 2011, 2013). Through its capacity to provide rich description of aspects of the experience of being a client or therapist, the findings of qualitative studies offer readers the possibility of understanding what happens in therapy.

At the present time, qualitative research is largely published in academic journals that are not readily accessible to members of the public, and written in an esoteric style that requires previous knowledge of academic conventions and debates. In response to this situation, an increasing number of qualitative researchers in disciplines such as education and healthcare have sought to reach wider audiences for their work. One of the ways in which they have done this is by augmenting written reports through the arts-based media such as song, pictures, sculpture, poetry and film/video (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Carless & Douglas, 2016; Douglas & Carless, 2018; Keen & Todres, 2007; Knowles & Cole, 2008). Eisner (2008) has described how knowledge arising from art helps develop understanding through the capacity for empathy and openness to being moved. Engagement with

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art can also have the effect of problematising pre-existing perspectives, through providing new ways with which to perceive and interpret the world, by means of constructing vivid imagined realities and to bring into focus aspects of reality that would otherwise go unknown (Eisner, 2008). Through music, movement and visual representation, the arts provide non-discursive ways of knowing (Langer, 1957). Art addresses the qualitative nuances of situations, with the consequence that engagement with art makes it possible to develop a deeper awareness of fine distinctions in meaning and action. Finally, the cultural function of art is to designate certain objects or performances as “special” (Dissanayake, 2000), thus ensuring that these activities are taken seriously, not forgotten, and considered as worthy of close attention, ongoing reflection and engaged discussion.

Theatre as an arts-based form of communication has received particular attention, for example through dramatisation of studies in Canada and USA that used ethnographic methodologies (Goldstein, 2012; Goldstein et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2011), and in Israel that used narrative (Lieblich, 2006) methodologies. A shared focus on the experience of human suffering, redemption and development represents fertile common ground between drama and social research. Existential themes lend themselves directly to artistic expression, and theatre drama can be used to complement insights communicated by research reports and textbooks. Theatre as a means of communicating findings of qualitative research has drawn on a range of perspectives (White & Belliveau, 2010, 2011) and has been applied in several different contexts, including professional training in Canada (Kontos & Naglie, 2007) and community activism in Ireland (Harte, 2017). Accounts of the process of transforming research findings into a stage play have described the use of contrasting dramaturgical methods and traditions. These include instances in which: the researcher was sole author of the play (Jones, 2013); the author had a background in both theatre and social research (Goldstein, 2012; Saldaña, 2011); the researcher, dramaturg and actors worked together to create a play (Rossiter et al., 2008); or where research data were handed over to a theatre director who had sole responsibility for writing the script (Lieblich, 2006). Research has been carried out into audience responses and learning resulting from such productions (Boydell et al., 2012).

There has been limited use of arts-based presentation of findings from qualitative research in counselling and psychotherapy. Rouse et al. (2015) used an exhibition of art objects to supplement conventional reporting of themes from interviews with therapists. Apart from one study that converted life history interviews on the topic of therapy and spirituality into a theatrical format (Willis et al., 2014), we are not aware of any attempts to use theatrical productions to disseminate the findings of psychotherapy research. The potential value of art and drama as media for communicating research-informed perspectives on therapy is underscored by the existence of drama therapy and various forms of arts-based therapies as well-established form of therapy practice, and an aesthetic, art-maker stance toward therapy practice (Geller, 2018) that includes a specifically dramaturgical perspective (Frantzich & Fels, 2018; MacCormack, 1997).

The present paper provides a methodological case study of our involvement in an interdisciplinary programme of psychotherapy research that resulted in the production of a theatre play. Our aim is to make it possible for therapists, therapy researchers, and those with interests in promoting the public awareness of psychotherapy, to benefit from what we have learned, in terms of an appreciation of both the possibilities and challenges associated with this type of project.

## **Method: a methodological case study**

A methodological case study comprises a description and analysis of the experience of conducting a specific research study or programme. The aim of such reports is to share “lessons learned” in a manner that will support and inform the endeavours of subsequent researchers and research teams seeking to carry out similar work. The structure of the present report corresponds to the approach taken in other methodological case studies in the field of psychotherapy (Koerner & Castonguay, 2015; Lahlou et al., 2015; McAleavey et al., 2015; Midgley et al., 2014).

The present methodological case study was carried out in the context of a larger research programme into how the individual characteristics, life experience and values of the therapist influence the process and outcome of therapy (Råbu et al., 2013). Within that programme, a review of existing research indicated that that doing justice to the complexity of therapist personal experience required a methodologically pluralist approach, drawing on multiple methods of data collection and analysis. As a consequence, we decided to deploy art-based methodologies and perspectives alongside a range of conventional research tools. Our assumption was that arts-based methods had the potential to help us to move beyond existing ways of thinking about the person of the therapist, and also open up forms of dissemination that might be particularly meaningful for our research audiences. The research team consists of eight psychologists from three countries and one artist, who is a theatre director and playwright, and has been a regular member of the research team, with particular responsibility for facilitating an arts-based perspective.

The first phase of the programme was a qualitative interview study that explored the experiences of senior therapists in Norway (Råbu & McLeod, 2018; Råbu et al., 2016). Participants were 12 highly experienced psychotherapists, including seven women and five men, ranging from 68 to 86 years in age. Nine were psychologists and three were psychiatrists. They had worked as psychotherapists for between 35 and 56 years. The interview guide was designed to enable participants to reflect on their professional role in the broadest sense, including its personal meaning. Ethical approval was obtained from the Norwegian Social Science Data Service. The study has so far been the basis for two research publications. One paper presented an analysis of how being a therapist affected the personal life of the therapists (Råbu et al., 2016). The second paper looked at the ways in which a lifetime of struggling with professional dilemmas resulted in a capacity for wisdom (Råbu & McLeod, 2018).

Once this dataset was analysed and published, further discussion in the research team led to a decision to transform it into a stage play. This process was overseen by the playwright member of the research team, in collaboration with two of the psychologist members. It took a period of 12 months between the eventual decision to create a play and the opening performance.

The success of the play, in terms of audience response, and the new insights around data analysis and dissemination generated within the research team, resulted in a realisation that it could be valuable to write a methodological case study (the present article) on the process of turning qualitative data into a theatre production. Because this initiative arose once the play had already been performed several times, it was not possible to secure ethical approval and consent around the systematic collection of data on the impact of the play on audiences, or its broader societal impact. In the results section below, the analysis of the impact of the play is therefore based solely on information already in the public domain.

The case analysis is based on written accounts, diary entries, meeting notes and copies of media coverage, generated and compiled by us (the co-authors of the present paper). Primary analysis of this dataset was carried out by the lead author, and audited by the other authors. Differences were resolved through dialogue.

## Results

The results of this methodological case study are presented as a narrative account, organised into three sections that reflect the key challenges and lessons arising from the experience of transforming a qualitative research study into a theatre play: addressing ethical issues, turning the interviews into a play, and audience reactions.

The theatre play (Norwegian title: *Overføring*; English: *Transference*) comprised a single-act production with six actors, with a running time of 90 minutes. Originally scheduled for 22 performances in the spring of 2017, *Overføring* was extended to include 31 additional performances in the autumn of 2017 and spring of 2018. Approximately 8770 individuals attended the play within a 13-month period. The title of the play arose from the observation by the playwright of the deepening of the interaction between interviewer and participants over the course of each interview. "Overføring"

translates as “transference”, which is one of the most central concepts in psychoanalysis (Freud, 1940 [1938]). The concept refers to a therapeutic process in which the past and present are brought together and explored within the client-therapist relationship. The title of the play evokes a tension between the technical psychotherapeutic meaning of the concept of transference and more everyday meanings: the transfer of knowledge and experience from one generation to the next, transfer of research into art, and the transfer of a piece of art to the audience in the form of the theatrical performance. In this way, the title functions as an important element of the experience of the play as a whole, by implicitly evoking multiple and ambiguous expectations and possible meanings in the audience, even before the performance begins.

As a means of allowing other researchers to learn from our experience, an outline of three key areas of learning in relation to this project are discussed in the following sections.

### ***Addressing ethical issues***

Presenting research data in the form of a theatre play requires careful consideration of ethical issues (Lieblich, 2006). Even though dissemination is a basic part of the process in any research project, creating theatre from research interviews is a very rare activity, which therefore calls for extraordinary care. We devoted considerable time and effort to ensuring that participants were well prepared to see someone else perform a scenic interpretation of selected aspects of very personal and perhaps vulnerable experiences from their own life.

The original senior therapist study had proceeded on the basis of a standard procedure of informed consent during the initial recruitment of participants. We decided that our personal and professional duty of care to participants required adopting an enhanced ethical strategy built around a concept of “process consent”. The practice of process consent is widely used in situations of ethical sensitivity and potential participant vulnerability (Miller & Boulton, 2007; Speer & Stokoe, 2014). Process consent involves a commitment to ongoing dialogue and shared decision making between researcher and participants over the course of a project (Cutcliffe & Ramcharan, 2002; Haverkamp, 2005; Saldaña, 1998, 2003, 2011).

At the time the participants were interviewed, all of them asked to be informed about the results, and they were subsequently supplied with copies of the research papers as these were published. Transformation of research material into a theatre play had not been anticipated at the outset of the study. Therefore, the primary researcher wrote to all participants and informed them about the idea, and invited their response, including objections, before the decision was made to embark on the project. They were also informed that they would be invited to read and respond to a draft of the script of the play. The primary researcher maintained contact with participants throughout the entire period in which the play was under construction, through to the first public performances in the theatre. The level of contact varied across participants. Some were satisfied merely to receive information, while others provided detailed feedback and suggestions. A few engaged in dialogue with the researcher over the whole period of the theatre production.

In the final script of the play, each character was based on material from at least three participants. Research participants were therefore not portrayed as identifiable individuals. The combination of material from the different participants contributed to anonymisation of information from research participants. This way of combining material is consistent with the widespread practice, in qualitative inquiry, of developing themes (Smith et al., 2009), categories (Charmaz, 2013) or text condensation units (Malterud, 2012) as a strategy for highlighting recurring core meanings within a body of data.

The final script for the play included passages that were either verbatim segments of interview data, or segments that had been changed to safeguard anonymity. Some of this material involved anonymised stories about clients with whom the participants had worked. None of their clients had consented to take part in research; and in the interviews, no identifiable information about them was shared with us. Nonetheless, it was necessary to ensure that, if any former clients attended the theatre performance, they would not be able to recognise their own anonymous story. We could

not leave out all stories involving clients. However, we took care to transform and disguise such stories, by distilling the quality of the therapist's experience into a version that nevertheless carried the essence of that experience. An example of how this was accomplished is our handling of a specific interview passage in which the informant described being attacked by one of their clients. This story conveyed several core themes, including the extent to which therapists were sometimes put under pressure by clients, the underlying ethical imperative to respond to clients in a compassionate manner, and the impact of the therapist position on family life. In our initial consultation with the informant regarding potential inclusion of this story in the play, they felt that our attempt to disguise the identity of the client was not sufficient. We then went back to the interview data and found elements from similar episodes, from other therapists, that we used to replace corresponding details in the original story. We devised three new versions of the story, which were checked out with the primary informant, who selected the one that, for them, most closely retained the emotional meaning of their experience while safeguarding the identity of the client. This kind of procedure was followed on several occasions with different text segments.

Dealing with elderly participants meant that some were facing serious illness and death. We therefore avoided using potentially sensitive material that had been provided by participants who were not well enough to engage fully in the consent process.

These ethical procedures proved to be effective in safeguarding the identities and sensitivities of participants. It is important to note all this was highly time-consuming, and involved a willingness on the part of the research team to relinquish control over the data, to allow a combination of participant preferences and artistic interpretation to generate new visions of the material.

### ***Turning the interviews into a play***

Alongside ongoing attention to ethical issues and the well-being of informants, there took place the crafting of a theatre play on the basis of the interview transcripts.

### ***Creating a script***

A crucial aspect of the process of making a theatre play is writing a script. Even though, at a later phase, the script may be revised in the light of the responses from actors, and the physical reality of enacting it on stage, the phase of writing is grounded in the creative imagination and sensibility of (usually) one person. In the case of *Overføring*, the playwright and director Tyra Tønnessen wrote the script (Råbu & Tønnessen, 2017), drawing on an approach to theatrical analysis developed by the Russian writers and theatre directors Tovstonogov (1972) and Malochevskaja (2002). Although the final script entirely comprised statements (or statements that had been modified to ensure anonymity) that originated in the transcripts, the artistic interpretation of the material was augmented by background knowledge gained through attending meetings of the research team and ongoing conversation and consultation with the principal investigator of the study.

Within the approach developed by Tovstonogov (1972), the first step in the process of analysing any text with the intention of making a theatre performance is to read through the complete text uninterrupted, paying attention to one's own emotional reactions, and indicating these responses in the margins of the text through annotations such as "here I laughed" and "here I cried". In addition, to bring attention to anything in the text that in any way surprised the reader. This bears similarity to the first reading in qualitative research analysis. Examples of material the playwright found surprising, were a therapist who described how he had swept problems under the carpet in his private life, and a therapist who talked about how she struggled to empathise with overweight people. Such indications of emotion and surprise guided the selection of material to be included in the script. The process of initial reading also included reflection on ways in which a theatre audience might respond to the material. The interviews with senior therapists explored issues such as ending a career, the personal impact of trying to help individuals with troubled lives, women in professional

jobs, and the experiences of high-status members of society. These themes had not been widely explored within theatre productions in Norway and therefore had potential to appeal to audiences.

Any good theatre play involves struggle, conflict, contrast, paradox and colliding perspectives. Conflicts can be between characters, or within a character. Likewise, each character needs to be in a dynamic process of change over the course of the play. Consequently, episodes and events in the research transcripts that conveyed crises and turning points were identified for potential inclusion in the script of the play.

Tovstonogov (1972) suggested that it is necessary to convey a sense of the kind of lifeworld within which the action takes place. The concept of lifeworld in this theory of art is similar to how it is used in qualitative research methods, as we search to explore human beings' lived experiences in context (Van Manen, 2014). *Overføring* evokes a world where economic constraints and cost-benefit thinking threaten the value and dignity of human beings: people who are not profitable are in danger of losing value. One lifeworld conflict was that those who are ill, children and elderly are especially vulnerable to being regarded as worthless by society, but are filled with inherent worth to those who relate closely to them. Similar threats can be part of totalitarian thoughts, which is a relevant lifeworld background since the participating therapists began their studies in the post-war period. The aftermath of the destructiveness of Nazism was a reality they had dealt with firsthand (Nilsen, 2013). The oldest participant had taken active part in a resistance group during the occupation of Norway in World War II, which is explicitly mentioned in the play. Pioneer therapists in Norway, who were mentioned by the participants in interviews, and who were also mentioned on stage, were directly affected by the war. For example, Harald Schjelderup was sent to a concentration camp. Nic Waal was involved in rescuing Jewish children. Åse Gruda Skard wanted to create new childrearing practises that would prevent children from growing up to be supporters of authoritarian ideologies such as Nazism (Nilsen, 2013).

Another lifeworld theme related to the relevance of religion. For some of the research participants, therapy represented liberation from repressive forms of religion, including shame, guilt and fear of hell. At present, religion has a decreasing influence in many Western societies. Psychology and psychotherapy can be seen as part of a humanistic project, where every human is seen as unique and valuable in of themselves. A further underlying theme was that psychotherapists are not superhuman. The characters were portrayed as complex and vulnerable human beings, yet still able to help other human beings.

### *The structure of the play*

The structure of the play was organised around the presentation of a set of internal, metaphorical universes, within which each character engaged in critical introspection, with the audience as an imagined dialogue partner. The action on stage was symbolic, not tied to a concrete place or time. Characters spoke directly to the audience, expressing the personal tensions and conflicts they had experienced over the course of a career as a therapist. While one character spoke to the audience, others enacted events from the memories and stories that were being recounted.

*The characters.* Six fictional characters were created by integration of material from the research interviews (see Table 1). Each character in the play was not meant to be a representation of a particular individual research participant, but instead drew on material from at least three interviews. The aim was to build complex characters, each with interesting conflicts and processes. The distinctive inner dialogue of each character gradually deepened and unfolded over the course of the play. The play as a whole conveyed the overarching struggle of psychotherapists, who are approaching the end of their lives, in affirming the value of their life and work, and the key choices they had made. Each character, in different ways, questioned the value and meaning of their work for themselves, their families, their clients, and for the larger society.

Within these overall narrative trajectories, the characters recounted stories that drew on their memories of burdens and "failures": for example, dealing with suicidal clients, cases where the therapist doubted that he or she has helped the client enough, or where the client developed a strong

**Table 1.** The six characters.

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<b>Oddvar's</b> struggle centred on his new identity as a retired person: who am I when I am no longer the psychotherapist? He articulated his realisation that he had partly lived through the lives of others, in an observer role.
<b>Thorfinn</b> struggled to confirm the value of his life's work, which had cost him much on a personal level. He acted as his own prosecutor and his own defender and invited the audience to be his judges.
<b>John</b> treated the audience as a source of admiration and affirmation. His struggle concerned his right to exist. He explained how he was a disappointment to his parents from the start, by being born as their third boy when they had hoped for a girl. By the end of the play, he was able to acknowledge that his effort at work and for the common good in society had made it clear that at least he had deserved his salary.
<b>Åse's</b> struggle was directly concerned with the transfer of knowledge and experience from one generation to another, and with a genuine wish to evaluate her own and her generation's work. She constituted the audience as her students or coresearchers, or as representing a society in need of psychological knowledge.
<b>Anne Marie's</b> struggle concerned the inclusion of her work as part of her identity. In the beginning, she was somewhat critical of the value of psychotherapy. Over the course of the play, Anne Marie shifted in the direction of more fully accepting that psychological knowledge can be of real help for people, allowing them to become more fully themselves, including herself; and that her work had been important for her and others.
<b>Gerd</b> expressed a range of struggles: to make sense of her work, to give herself space and freedom, to leave the work that she loved, and to gain acceptance for child psychotherapy.

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dependency on the therapist. For some of the characters such memories were overwhelming to a degree that they became close to losing faith in the value of their work. The increasing openness and closeness of the protagonists to each other, over the course of the performance, reflected the dramaturgical convention that characters gradually “win” their struggles to reach their various goals.

### *Visual aesthetics*

The transition from script to theatre production introduced influences from a range of sources, such as the set designer and the actors themselves. On stage, each character was at different times the main focus of attention, just as the therapists were in the research interview situation. In the beginning of the play, when a character was in focus, a square field of light was used to define the therapist's office. The therapists had one chair each, and all the chairs were different. Six enormous icicles hung from the roof behind each chair, melting and dripping silently throughout the play. Icicles are cold, and are a material that is continually in a process: they are melting, they can be crushed, they can fall down, and they can rock through the air. The icicles could be abstract reminders of the suffering experienced by clients who seek therapy. They can also appear as concrete representation of nature and beauty. One newspaper reviewer suggested that they represented the hidden, secret tears of the therapists (Levin, 2017).

### *Audience reactions*

The play was staged in a large professional theatre, and members of the research team attended the play on several occasions, and were able to observe audience reactions and engage in informal discussions with audience members following the performance. The primary researcher held several introductions of the play at the theatre, sometimes together with the theatre director, including question and answer sessions. There were several reviews of the play in newspapers (Bikset, 2017; Flottorp, 2017; Kraft, 2018; Kvalvik, 2017; Levin, 2017; Optun, 2017), radio (Nystøyl, 2017) and blogs (Bjørk, 2017; Heiervang, 2017; Risvik, 2017; Stotesbury, 2017). The primary researcher was interviewed about the play in the main national TV news (Revheim, 2017), on a national radio programme (Reite et al., 2017), in a podcast from the theatre (Torp, 2017), in the Journal for the Norwegian Psychological Association (Strand, 2017), in national newspapers and in a research blog (Milde, 2017). The play was discussed on social media. In addition, the primary researcher received dozens of e-mails and messages from psychologists, psychiatrists, all kinds of doctors, nurses, judges, teachers, people working in child welfare systems and in the police, and several retired people, testifying that they had found the play personally meaningful and useful. The predominant themes in responses to the play were a recognition of being a vulnerable human being and at the same time taking responsibility and care for others, along with an experience of being emotionally moved by what they had seen and heard.



## Discussion

Our aim in this article has been to share our experiences in working with qualitative research material all the way through from data collection to the eventual staging of a theatre play. We would like to use this closing discussion to offer our reflections on what we have learned as a result of engaging in this process, and explore some of the wider implications of this learning for qualitative research practice.

We believe, on the basis of our experience, that theatre-based analysis and presentation of qualitative research findings has the potential to make a meaningful contribution to knowledge and understanding of therapy. Compared to what was possible in a journal article, a theatre *personalises* findings, through showing – in action – how themes are linked together by being based in a life and by highlighting differences across participants. A theatre production foregrounds a sense of human agency and choice/motivation that was implicit in the articles that we wrote, but not given as much emphasis.

We found that a dramaturgical perspective drew attention to the interview as a performance rather than as merely a means of collecting participant accounts. Although this aspect of qualitative inquiry has been highlighted by some researchers (Lynch & Mannion, 2016; Nousiainen, 2015; Sallee & Harris, 2011), a drama-informed approach had the potential not only to sensitise the interviewer and data-analyst to what was happening. In addition, it could open up possible ways of conveying this phenomenon, for example through shifts in relationships between characters, or inner voices within characters, over the course of a performance.

Our impression was that combining stories and themes from different research participants into a composite character was not a strategy that had been widely used by other playwrights who had worked with social researchers. By contrast, the general approach to developing the structure of a research-based play appears to have been to use the stage to allow specific informants to have a more powerful voice. The practice of creating composite characters is similar in some respects to the use of “ideal type” analysis by researchers influenced by the ideas of the sociologist Max Weber (Swedberg, 2018; Wachholz & Stuhr, 1999). However, whereas the aim of ideal type analysis the writer of is to assemble composites that reflect general tendencies (i.e. are commonly found in the population, and easily recognisable), the writer of *Overføring* used composites to highlight conflict and tension within specific characters and to maintain the ethics of anonymity and confidentiality.

The concept of *ekphrasis* – the act of representing a work of art in a different medium from that within which it was originally produced – offers a means of making sense of the distinctive characteristics of theatre-based knowing. The concept of *ekphrasis* was originally used in the context of written descriptions of real (or imagined) works of art such as paintings and sculptures (see, for example, Scott, 1999). However, in recent times it has been used to refer to any kind of transformation of art, such as a musical piece about a painting, or a movie based on a novel. Looked at as an example of *ekphrasis*, *Overføring* allows certain aspects of the original written text to be seen and experienced in a new light, while at the same time hiding other strands of meaning within the text. For example, the play placed the words of these senior therapists in the context of broad existential and cultural themes such as the experience of caring for others. By contrast, the research articles more closely contextualised themes in relation to other research studies, and to psychological theories of wisdom, the psychotherapy relationship, and the career pathways of therapists.

In considering the audience response to the play, it is important to note that little is known about how conventional scientific reports are read and received by research consumers. Comments received from individuals who had attended performances of *Overføring* indicated that most had undergone an experience that was considerably more emotionally intense than if they had read a research article. Discussing potential contributions of qualitative research in the field of psychology and psychotherapy research, Binder et al. (2016) underscored processes of discovery, reflexivity, critique, receptivity and evocation. In particular, they argued that qualitative research can bring to life

and evoke empathy with phenomena of suffering and despair in a way that is less available to quantitative research. For example, when in a quantitative research it is reported that a high number of psychotherapists face severe fatigue or burnout, this might come across as a piece of information or a fact that is cognitively stored. A qualitative study of such processes might evoke resonance, experiential knowledge and personal relevance in the reader. This point is further detailed by Natvik and Moltu (2016) who have discussed the potential of qualitative, and in particular phenomenological research, to facilitate personal engagement with issues. They contend that in a professional world associated with a constant and massive flow of objectified information, an inherent risk is to become overloaded and disengaged from the reality of the human beings behind the numbers. In our experience with *Overføring*, theatrical performances have a strong potential for evocative engagement. Theatre also allows a space within which one can view oneself, others, and the activities we take part in, from different angles. Finally, a theatre audience almost certainly spends longer attending to the topic and reflecting on it afterwards (through recall of memorable scenes) than would readers of research articles. In relation to the degree of exposure to informant lived experience available to the research consumer, it is worth noting that, compared to the results section of the published research articles, the theatre play incorporated a much higher proportion of actual participant interview transcript text. It is possible to view research articles as presenting a version of participant accounts that is more diluted (i.e. embedded in researcher-generated text) and at the same time exaggerated (claiming special significance through being contextualised in relation to other studies). Through the process of dramatisation, the material is actually *given life* through deployment of vivid imagery and involvement of multiple sensory modalities.

In qualitative research, effective attention to the issue of researcher reflexivity and positioning (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000; Finlay, 2003) is regarded as a key criterion for evaluating the validity and trustworthiness of reported results (Elliott et al., 1999; Levitt et al., 2018; Morrow, 2005). Typically, researcher reflexivity consists of members of the research team making explicit their preconceptions (Hill, 2012), with the aim of bracketing their prior assumptions in order to stay as open as possible to whatever might emerge from the process of qualitative inquiry. However, in traditional research, including research that we have conducted ourselves, reflexivity processes might be limited by homogeneity of the researcher group, for example by all of the researcher participants being psychotherapists and psychotherapy researchers from the same tradition. Multidisciplinary and collaborative approaches have been suggested as potential avenues towards strengthening the quality of reflexivity processes (Veseth et al., 2017). In the current project, we found the artistic dimension of our work to be helpful in relation to reflexivity processes, on two levels. First, the multidisciplinary approach in which an artist was part of the core research team, with her own perspectives and background for understanding the material at hand, allowed for a deeper process of bringing implicit understandings to explicit discussions and questioning. Second, through the theatrical method of analysing the deep personal context of the lifeworld of participants, new contexts for understanding how the participants talked from different positions than our own, supported reflexivity processes in the more traditional parts of the project.

The process of transforming interview transcripts into a theatre play required enlisting a wide group of research participants (therapists who had been interviewed, theatre workers) in a joint endeavour, in similar fashion to participatory action research (Baum et al., 2006). Our experience was that while this undertaking was hard work, and time-consuming, it had the advantage of requiring the principal researchers to engage with multiple perspectives and voices (see Borg et al., 2012) in a way that would not normally occur in conventional data analysis. This led to a sense of learning something new about the meaning of being a senior therapist, over and above the level of insight that had been gained from initially conducting and analysing the interviews.

A notable aspect of the approach taken by the playwright, to the task of shaping the interview transcripts into a script that could be performed, was her technique following Tovstonogov (1972), of being emotionally open to the material, and making notes on transcripts when a strong feeling occurred in her. This practice is similar to the principles of “emotionally-sensed knowing”

(Hubbard et al., 2001), “embodied categorising” (Rennie & Fergus, 2006) and sensitivity to researcher countertransference (Strømme et al., 2010). Distinctive aspects of this theatre-based version of these qualitative research practices were that it was accomplished in a straightforward manner. The playwright was operating from an understanding that her emotional response was not merely an entry point into significant areas of meaning within a transcript, but also a potential indicator of words and scenes that might be of interest to, and move, an eventual theatre audience.

The use of theatre has implications for the public dissemination of research-based knowledge of psychotherapy (Granek & Nakash, 2016). Theatre has the potential to achieve a wider reach in terms of audience diversity: high quality artistic expression leads to word-of-mouth communication that spreads awareness of key ideas through relevant target populations. The theatre production not only enables additional audiences for the work, through performances, but in this case triggered other events where the researcher was invited to interact with specific groups of clinicians and researchers.

Staging a theatre play is very costly. The staging of this play was made possible because the playwright/director is highly reputable. In Norway, most theatres are publicly owned and to a large degree publicly-financed cultural institutions, where audience tickets are considerably subsidised. *Overføring* was staged as a co-production between the two largest theatres in Oslo. The price for one ticket was from 240 Norwegian Kroner, about £23, and less for students and retirees.

Finally, it is essential to be aware of the limitations of this methodological case study. Absent from this account is the opportunity for readers to have a direct experience of *Overføring* itself. There would also have been value in using interviews or questionnaires to access the experiences of audiences who attended the play (Keen & Todres, 2007). Moreover, we recognise that there are many different ways of transforming research into theatre, as well as various purposes such endeavours may seek to accomplish (Beck et al., 2011). An approach that is effective for a general audience in a professional theatre may not be appropriate for work that aims to reflect the specific concerns or learning needs of a particular community or professional group. Finally, it needs to be kept in mind that there exist many different traditions of dramaturgical analysis and theatre production: the development of *Overføring* reflected a particular theatrical tradition. It would be important in further research into theatre-based dissemination of research findings, to be able to assess the comparative impact of different styles of playmaking.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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