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Reluctant Researchers: Therapists in Search of a Straightforward Heartfelt Method

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Abstract

This paper offers a concrete form of phenomenological research that is consistent with basic therapeutic skills taught in many university psychotherapy courses. Most students do not enrol in psychotherapy training in order to do research and they thus embark on their research project somewhat reluctantly. I suggest that offering a model of qualitative research consistent with relational and existential-humanistic forms of therapy training will encourage trainee therapists to incorporate their therapy training into their research study. The research aims to address the reluctance of these psychotherapy trainees to engage in research, and to suggest that there can be forms of research consistent with the clinical skills they are learning as trainee therapists – and as a consequence, we will see more engaged therapy research and high-quality qualitative studies. The paper explores compatibilities between the philosophy of phenomenology and psychotherapy, and addresses questions of objectivity and natural science bias that can creep into psychotherapy research.

Key words: qualitative research methods; psychotherapy training; psychotherapy research; phenomenology; existential.

Psychotherapists are increasingly under pressure to engage in empirical research during their training. Though some practitioners respond eagerly to the recent emphasis on research, others do not. In fact, as an academic supervisor at various training institutes, I typically encounter psychotherapy and counselling psychology trainees who balk at commencing their obligatory research projects. Research is not what attracted them to their future profession. Many of these trainees consider themselves practitioners rather than researchers or scientists, and they don't readily see the relevance of an empirical dissertation to their clinical practice. For some trainees these are disparate activities requiring quite different sensitivities. Often these trainees feel a clash between the objectivity they believe is required of research and the subjectivity that is the foundation of their practice.

Even trainees who study at institutes with an emphasis on qualitative methodologies can feel a mismatch between their developing practice and the methods they are encouraged to adapt. Students may end up following a method that feels mechanical because it offers the most straightforward steps; and regardless of its insensitivity to their developing therapeutic skills, it seems the clearest route through the dissertation process. Even trainees at institutes with humanistic and existential orientations can find themselves alienated from their own research projects because the available methods seem at odds with their way of being a therapist; and whilst they may feel confident enough to develop their own personal form of practice, in keeping with their unique human sensitivities, they are not confident enough to walk that same plank when it comes to developing their own research methods.

In the following paper I will attempt to present a style of phenomenological method that I believe offers a continuum for trainees who are developing relationally focused existential or

humanistic foundations for therapeutic practice. It attempts to combine rigour with sensitivity in the hope that it maintains some of the artistry and dialogue of practice within an intention to stay true to co-researcher accounts. It is an attempt to offer psychotherapy and psychology trainees a seamless integration of research, practice, reflexivity and personal authenticity.

What Kind of Phenomenology?

The natural scientific approach, which is what we typically mean by 'science', is a *practical* and *particular* human construction. Its practicality is evidenced in products like the computer that I'm using to write this paper, or in new medical procedures. Its particularity is less acknowledged, but resides in the fact that science is one way of *perceiving*, a way which prioritises a separate subject gazing across empty space at a static object. Science is a useful metaphor, not incontrovertible reality.

Science can be the basis of psychological and therapeutic endeavours. However, there is also a distinguished lineage (including the philosophers Husserl, Dilthey, Heidegger, Habermas, and, more recently, the psychologists Giorgi, Colaizzi, and Moustakas),[1] which maintains that natural science inquiry is inadequate for the study of the human experiences of interest to counsellors, therapists and psychologists. This lineage is compatible with the phenomenological basis of humanistic and existential trainings.

The natural science approach idolises objectivity in its obsession with discovering and explaining the *one true world*. Objectivity, in this sense, equates with concepts of quantifiability, reliability, validity and replicable experimentation, with the inherent motivations of predictability and possible technical control which will inhere in all places, at all times, given certain specifiable conditions. This describes the methodological orientation of positivism, expounding the central thesis that, '… only events which can be observed, or that only propositions which are (at least in principle) testable, have a claim to truth….' (Ashworth, 2003, p. 11).[2] Therefore, in order to comply, intricate lived experience is often reformulated into discrete quantifiable scales or questionnaires, to give the *appearance* of objectivity.

For all its concern with objectivity, the positivist scientific enterprise simply assumes and reifies the fundamental concepts harboured within the everyday language of our natural common-sense attitude to life. In response, the philosopher Edmund Husserl proposed the praxis of phenomenology, introducing meticulous conceptual analysis of our basic concepts in order to ground inquiry in philosophical rigour. In order to examine what science is talking about, Husserl reduces premature abstraction back to its ground in concrete lived experience. Ashworth (2003) indicates Husserl's premise that for psychology, lived *experience* thus properly constitutes the point of departure for our investigations. Phenomenological approaches endeavour to comprehend the full experience of an individual life by making 'a methodological discipline of the everyday communicative experience of understanding oneself and others' (Habermas,1972, p. 163). The '*observing subject and object* is replaced by the *participant subject and partner'* (ibid., pp.179–81, italics added). It should be apparent that an emphasis on clarifying everyday assumptions within engaged dialogue is already reminiscent of what transpires in relational therapeutic practice.

This *human science* approach 'highlights our awareness that psychology inevitably involves the investigation and interpretation of *meaning*' (Spinelli, 2005, p. 129), leading to intricate and nuanced forms of understanding experience. This understanding accepts that the researcher/practitioner cannot jump out of

> his own life activity and just suspend the context of tradition in which his own subjectivity has been formed in order to submerge himself in a sub-historical stream of life that allows the pleasurable identification of everyone with everyone else. (Habermas, 1972, p. 181)

This 'copy theory of truth', which is attempted by controlled observation in positivistic science, is jettisoned in favour of an approach based upon

acceptance that not only are meanings always interpretive, but also co-constituted. Therefore, in both phenomenological research and phenomenological clinical practice, the researcher and practitioner must investigate their own as well as the other's understandings. Supervision, in both its academic and clinical forms, is useful in helping the researcher and practitioner, respectively, explore their own assumptions, and how those assumptions shape and affect their interactions with both co-researchers and clients.

The researcher and practitioner accept that it is not possible to eradicate the influential interactive component of being human. In accepting the inevitability of co-constituted meanings, we also acquiesce to modest claims regarding the status of 'results' for a phenomenological study. Most practitioners would accept that the course of therapy would be different with each therapist, so why not the outcome of a phenomenological study? If reality is indeed interpreted and interactional, then we are implicated by reality, and we can offer but one version of that reality, not a definitive conclusion peppered with irrefutable facts.

The type of study I propose requires that both researcher and co-researchers exist from the 'inside-out', not as mere perceptions to be studied behaviourally by an ideal observer. Rather than causal explanations, we seek *unconcealment*, or the uncovering of aspects of implicit existence that may have been eclipsed by received assumptions. As a being, each person belongs to the totality of Being, so revelations of any person are revelations of Being. Transcendental-hermeneutic phenomenology, then, does not simply seek to lay out the general structure of self-interpreting being; it claims to force into view a substantive truth about human beings. Not only is human being interpretation all the way down, so that our practices can never be grounded in human nature, God's will, or the structure of rationality; but this condition is one of such radical rootlessness that everyone feels fundamentally unsettled (*unheimlich*) – that is, senses that human beings can *never* be at home in the world. This, according to Heidegger, is why we plunge into trying to make ourselves at home and secure. Thus, the conformist, everyday activities in which human beings seek to give their lives some stable meaning reveal to Heidegger a flight motivated by the pre-ontological understanding each human being has of his or her ultimate ungroundedness (Dreyfus, 1991, p. 37).

However, it would be contradictory and hypocritical to approach co-researcher interviews full of Heideggerian reflection. Even Heidegger needs to step aside until the phenomenon speaks for itself.

Practical Methods for Such a Study

A certain form of semi-structured interview can be consistent with the intention not to obstruct the emergence of the lived reality of experience, and to remain as intimate as possible with the co-researcher's own symbolisation of their individual understandings. This *style* of phenomenology allows the trainee therapist or psychologist to practise their therapeutic skills in the interview situation. It would make no sense to artificially restrict trainees when they come to research interviews so that the transcript of the research activity is less rich than a clinical transcript of the same material. Why not encourage these trainees to utilise their therapeutic sensitivity in the research situation?

Of course, an interview has different ethical boundaries and different intentions compared with an ongoing therapeutic relationship. Researchers are not engaged in ongoing explorations designed to address troubling life situations for co-researchers. However, to artificially bind researchers who have enhanced communication skills, in the service of some hangover of objectivity, makes no sense and phenomenologically we would have to wonder what impact this imposed restriction would have on the interview environment.

We can naïvely search for a phenomenology that would be rigorous in the sense of exhaustively comprehensive, devoid of obvious assumptions, finite and true. But nothing can satisfy those initial criteria, though some phenomenologists attempt to do so. The researcher must eventually

accept the limits of a phenomenological attitude, namely that the phenomenologist is engaged in self-discovery as much as exploration about the experiential world of others. In the interview situation, two of us are incontrovertibly mixed and presented as inter-affecting each other: in this sense, the researcher is also participant, implicit within each co-researcher's transcript. This mode of phenomenology aims to eventually achieve a 'felt recognition' in the reader of what has hitherto remained unspoken in his or her own lived experience. In this view phenomenology is never complete; if 'successful', it offers a felt edge of exploration, at least in the embodied reader. Upon reading, it is an ongoing process, not a representation.

Methodological Comportment: Acknowledging Interaction

The work of the philosopher Eugene Gendlin is evident as an undercurrent throughout this method. His therapeutic form of self-reflection, called 'Focusing' (1981), constitutes both an embodied practice of self-reflection as well as a foundation for practice and sensitive psychological research. Focusing is a phenomenological process of attending to the feeling of our bodies in interaction with our life situations and concerns. Paying attention to concretely felt responses to life can bring new insights beyond our usual biases and self-knowledge, and can also lead to shifts in our experiencing. This way of being can form the implicit basis of the interviewer's stance, in that responses to co-researchers are consistently guided by the interviewer's 'felt sense' of the interview.

The assumptions of the method I'm proposing here can be contrasted with other popular phenomenological methods. For example, the method of Amedeo and Barbro Giorgi (2003, pp. 25–50) reflects a kind of Husserlian optimism. The Giorgis' method remains orthodox regarding assumptions of one's ability to grab essences from the shadow side of life and bring them towards the light, although they are careful to limit their epistemological claims to presentations rather than actualities (ibid., p. 32). Their method is designed to 'discern the psychological essence of the phenomenon' based upon the 'general dictates of science' (ibid., p. 27). The Giorgis suggest that the researcher should, of course, abandon a 'purely biographical attitude' and, in their language, take on the psychological attitude of his or her professional role as researcher.

I prefer to reverse their stated emphasis, in part due to my scepticism regarding the so-called 'role-based' rather than 'person-based' intuitions of the researcher. The researcher (as well as the practitioner) cannot bracket being a particular person, and inevitably affects the co-researcher as such, before a word is spoken, or a professional persona is manifested. To try to address this impact by 'professionalising' the researcher seems naïve, even if it were desirable. The impression is that the Giorgis adopt this view at least partially in order to placate the natural scientific community by adopting a semblance of controlled 'objectivity' in the phenomenological process. The result is a researcher whose intentions are closer to the 'neutral' stance of the analytic or cognitive professional. In contrast, I prefer to highlight the variability of the mutual impact of the researcher/co-researcher dyad, celebrating the essential interactional foundation of research interviews, and acknowledging the fertile crossing of phenomenology and autobiography. Again, the complementarity with existential or humanistic therapy should be clear.

The current method emphasises that the world is brought in – including the co-researcher's world of slippery self-understanding in the presence of the researcher, who is simultaneously engaged in both self-reflection and attempts at other-directed understanding. These 'selves' are thought to be already a mutual environment in which the individual understandings are generated and elaborated by the shared situation: they are not assumed to be separate, with the occasional self–other leakage over an otherwise scientifically convenient gap.

The willingness to accept the impact of autobiography in this process incorporates a form of Moustakas's (1994) heuristic research. It is 'heuristic' in the sense of being a '… self-

inquiry and dialogue with others aimed at finding the underlying meanings of important human experiences' (Moustakas, 1994, p. 18). Yet it does not subscribe to the more radical individualistic trends in heuristic research, nor the prioritising of the individual account over the shared features of the experience as it emerges. The closest match from phenomenological research literature to the 'spirit' of the present proposal, though not the method, is probably found in the writing of Max van Manen (2002, 1997).

In his book *Researching Lived Experience* (1997), van Manen begins with the strident premise that 'The things we are trying to describe or interpret are not really things at all – our actual experiences are literally "nothing". And yet, we seem to create some-thing when we use language in human science inquiry' (ibid., p. xviii). He suggests that one's research method should be in harmony with one's being. In our case this includes the abiding personal interests that lead trainees into existential or humanistic training in psychotherapy or applied psychology. Therefore, there is a personal 'tonal context' underlying the concrete method described below. The 'tone' is a foundational 'felt sense': a general *feeling* that guides decisions regarding the approach and the understanding of what arises from that approach.

There are contradictions in writing a phenomenological study that is simultaneously bound by academic conventions. For example, the convention of citing other works in order to situate or even defend an exploration of lived experience is, in a sense, 'anti-phenomenological' in its move away from the 'thing itself', and its appeal to authority, status quo, previously accepted understandings. But in another sense, what could ever be anti-phenomenological? By appealing to the work of other researchers, we reveal the insecurity of following our own experience, the doubts and lack of confidence of arguing what may be an unconventional perspective to an institutional setting, with the implicit power dynamics of writing a thesis for an advanced degree.

Interview Design and Recruitment

Keeping the interview protocol as simple as possible in order to enable each interview to take its own course, and revealing issues that might have been masked by a more comprehensive pre-set protocol, allow each co-researcher to speak for him- or herself without a battery of questions structuring their responses. In the open interview format, the researcher depends upon their skills as a phenomenologically informed therapist to follow the co-researcher's emerging dialogue, and to seek clarifications and open up experiences, much as they would with a client. The depth of the resulting dialogue and the possibility that the interview shifts the co-researcher's understanding highlight the similarity with a therapy session.

Co-researcher selection should be based upon certain guidelines, but the importance of these may vary according to the topic of the study. Co-researchers should have an interest in the topic, a willingness to discuss it, and the ability to reflect upon their lived experience. They need to be robust enough to engage in an open interview situation and have access to support afterwards, should they want that. In some instances, the pool of co-researchers might have specific demographic characteristics, e.g. single female, between ages of 30 and 40; and in other cases the researcher might feel it is necessary to have a representative sample of the general population. Whatever the selection of co-researchers, it must be justified. What is the researcher assuming if they feel obliged to recruit a 'representative sample'? In the recruitment of co-researchers, old assumptions from objective science and its reliance on randomised controlled experimental designs often sneak in. The researcher should think carefully about whether these are appropriate, and address their selection criteria carefully in the final dissertation.

The Reflexive Experience of Interviewing

Rigour in the co-created phenomenological interview is demonstrated by the intention to explicate and remain aware of, as far as possible, the researcher's preconceptions and contribution

to the interviews. Lowes and Prowse (2001) maintain a Heideggerian stance by acknowledging that both co-researchers and researcher are already in the world and interpreting that world, and this is impossible to bracket (or *fully* explicate). The researcher's preconceptions and interests are thereby inextricably bound in the generation of 'data'. This acknowledges that every interview response incorporates the speaker's interpretation of the previous statement, thus both researcher and co-researcher experiences are reflected in the transcript.

If the researcher is engaged in a study of a topic that is of personal relevance and interest (as it is often argued *should* be the case in phenomenological research), then it is unrealistic to assume that the researcher can bracket this during the study. An emphasis on 'connection' is especially important if the topic is emotionally engaging, and attempts at bracketing might be misconstrued as coldness, lack of empathy, or experimental distance. In place of attempted neutrality, the researcher should record their preconceptions, experiences and views, not only during the interview stage but also during the analysis stage, and this should be included in the text of the dissertation. However, it should also be noted that a Heideggerian approach to interviewing does not mean merger between the two people: there remains a genuine interest in the other, *their* perspective, experiences, and *their* way of being-in-the-world. Simply put, there exists no presupposition that an individual being can be explored in any pure form, without the influence of the other being in the room. The unfolding dialogue unfolds very differently, depending on who is in the other chair.

For example, the traditional interview considerations contrast being an 'insider' against being an 'outsider'. Insiders are researchers who study a group to which they belong, and supposedly therefore have an advantage because they are able to use their knowledge of the group to gain intimate insights. Outsiders, by contrast, can supposedly be more objective and might be confided in by virtue of their lack of association with the group being studied. However, these binaries freeze the positions of the interviewer and interviewee, while being an insider or outsider is actually a dynamic that can change over and over again during the course of an interview, depending upon the momentary facet of the experience coming to light. In my own research experience, being an 'insider' was addressed explicitly by interviewees as an advantage, offering a rare opportunity for in-depth discussion about a topic not in the public domain. However, with each co-researcher there were issues on which, by virtue of my gender, home culture, values, etc. I was an outsider, listening to their experience from a distance. During the interviews, a degree of trust and openness was engendered, and we often found 'positional spaces' that were not based upon identifiable indicators of in- and out-groupings.

Writing up

In writing up and interpreting the research study, power is almost uniformly invested in the researcher. The researcher decides what quotations to use to support their argument, and what aspects of the interview are not emphasised. The theoretical or philosophical frameworks used to explore the implications of the study are also chosen by the researcher, influenced by the researcher's reading, their supervisor's biases and their own life experience. One way of addressing this is for the researcher to engage in a transparent reflexive attitude, using self-disclosure in the text. The researcher can also seek co-researcher verification at various stages, although there is no assumption that if there is a disagreement, the co-researcher account is automatically prioritised. Such an incident, and any choices subsequently made by the researcher in their text, should be adequately explored in the final dissertation. Again, the research process is similar to the therapeutic process, and the research text, like session notes, includes comment on process as well as content. Transparency is a worthy guiding principle. The 'methodology' section of the write-up would typically include some reference to the experience of conducting the study. In describing what I actually *did* with co-researchers, I can also refer to their reactions in order to convey the active coming-into-being of the study. It is often in the response to an intervention (question,

clarification, highlighting an apparent contradiction…) that the intention and context of my intervention is clarified. In this way there is mutual clarification which undoubtedly impacts my phrasings of the next question and conduct of the next interview, and so on….

The Interview Protocol

The final interview protocol explicitly asks a set of questions in a specific order unless the co-researcher spontaneously begins to address a question before it was asked. In that case, prioritise the interviewee's narrative order rather than the researchers.

The first question, like the beginning of a first therapy session, is designed to elicit an open-ended description of the topic being explored. Responses to this question frequently expand to take up half the interview time. At this stage the researcher does little more than clarify statements, summarise and reflect back. These paraphrasings, summaries and requests for clarification are enough to encourage an interested co-researcher to fill in much of the detail of their experience, often resulting in a 'deepening' of affect in the narration.

The researcher's interventions are inevitably informed by their interest in the topic, so although their statements and requests follow directly from the co-researcher's discourse, they are doubtless already skewed to elicit information of relevance to the general topic of the study. For example, at the beginning of a recent interview I conducted, one of the co-researchers, 'Christine', was talking about the various factors influencing her decision to study in England rather than closer to her native country. She mentions her father's ethnicity, the courses on offer at the English university, many things that might be of interest if pursued. However, it is the following statement that I pick up on: 'And so the decision came probably through different factors, one of them being I didn't feel very at home at school, I didn't like the environment so I didn't want to do what the majority of people were doing….' In response, I ask, 'So around the age of 17, *something* was going on that you didn't quite feel at home?'.

The word '*something'* encourages the co-researcher to become more curious about their experience, focusing in on a specific aspect of her story. In this way the interview becomes a co-construction, a meeting of co-researcher story and researcher interest.

It is also worth acknowledging a specific use of language. Conditional and tentative language is always preferred, with specific use of *pointing* words like 'something', or phrases like 'something about that….'. This encourages the co-researcher to delve further into the unreflected or unspecified aspect of what they have just said. It points *down into*, rather than *onwards away-from.* In the above example, rather than selecting a facet of the statement to expand upon ('Can you name the other factors that influenced that decision?'), I employ the word 'something' to implicitly invite the co-researcher to find her own opening into what may lie just beyond the edge of what she has previously been able to say about this experience. This form of interaction is based on existential-phenomenological psychotherapy, and the method of experiential listening/self-reflection is called 'Focusing' (Gendlin, 1981).

The remaining set questions of the interview protocol are also purposefully vague and general. The specificity comes from picking up on the issues that are revealed, as the co-researcher picks up the question in their own specific way. This, again, is very similar to the deepening middle phase of a therapy session. Arguably the last question for the interview is usefully along the lines of, 'What does it feel like for you to talk about these things?'. This is an opportunity to make the *process* of the interview explicit, rather than just the narrative of explicit content. Making the felt experience explicit can add significantly to the sense we make of the co-researcher's accounts. Also, the last question overtly attests to the impact of having the opportunity to discuss the topic, perhaps for the first time, during the research interview.

Assumptions Regarding the Style of Analysis

As a phenomenological account, this project is a venture into the unfathomable, away from the

known concepts and sustaining certainties of science or theory. At best it clears a path towards a source, meandering in a direction that leads a little further on, or a little further astray.

The educational phenomenologist Max van Manen depicts phenomenology as an experience of humility and depth. I would like to add to this that it might also be a transitory experience. Phenomenological 'essences' might be more like waves that arise on the ocean than boxes that we stumble upon in the dark. Though the interviews I present are permanently fixed by print and audio, they are the result of what arises between two specific people at a specific convergence in our lives. At that temporal intersection the two of us meld a shared situation, constituting the environment in which we both further experienced our interaction. The interviews generate transcripts that remain metaphoric accounts, pointing back to the lived experiences being narrated as well as to the possibilities and limits of our specific interaction. By 'metaphoric' I mean that language *points* rather than *fixes*. A word, in its pointing directly to an aspect of experience, affects that experience, shapes it, but the experience simultaneously remains more than just the words, without which the words themselves would have no meaning in their situational usage. There are many ways, not just one way, of expressing something, of 'pointing' at something eager to enter saying, but the pointing must be right enough to touch what it refers to directly – not just any saying will be meaningful. An experiential shift tells us what is meaningful and what is not, at any moment. Research interviews can be guided by the valuing of such experiential 'carrying forward', facilitating new shifts in understanding for the co-researchers. Again, this experiential perspective on phenomenology betrays my indebtedness to the process philosophy of Eugene Gendlin (see especially Gendlin, 1973, 1977).

As previously stated, an implication of this understanding is that I assume the meanings that were generated *during the interviews* may have arisen differently with another researcher. The validity of what did arise on these occasions can be seen in the co-researchers' accounts of changed understanding during the interview.

As is increasingly apparent, along with Gendlin's philosophy van Manen's phenomenology is taken as a convenient gathering point for the salient sensibilities inherent within this approach: namely, an interweaving and inter-affecting of hermeneutics and intersubjective heuristics, with the intention of evoking the reader's felt response. Van Manen reminds us that in phenomenological research, writing is our method; and if research writing is conceived as a *reporting* process rather then a *poetic* one, imbued with values of methodological objectivity, abstract systematising and the conservative narratives of 'hard' science, we may lose the nuanced fecundity of qualitative insight. 'Method can become a "law" and the work sterile, method can kill a piece of qualitative research' (van Manen, 1997, p. 125). This doesn't mean that a phenomenological text should become so gaudy that it distracts attention on to the written page itself and away from the lived experience being described. The text should *point* repeatedly in order to let something 'shine through' (ibid., p. 130). That is the intention of this study, following in the vein of evocative and expressive approaches to phenomenology as described by Todres (1998) and Willis et al. (2001), with a focus on immediacy and aliveness, an instance of re-living rather than re-porting.

Transcript Analysis

My guiding intention during the analysis phase is to reduce the overwhelming volume of data inherent in the transcripts to manageable units and themes that will fulfil expectations of sensitive descriptive transposition rather than abstract speculative interpretation. I have endeavoured to remain as close as possible to the co-researchers' own accounts for as long as possible through the stages of increasing generalisability. This is in contrast to the approach advocated by the Giorgis (2003), which seems prematurely abstract in its move, at an initial phase of analysis, from the co-researcher's own language into the slightly

oppressive third person of generalised psychology.

The Giorgis follow a four-stage process, beginning with a careful reading of the description (interview transcript in the present case), followed by the formation of meaning units from a careful re-reading of the transcripts. It is acknowledged that the meaning units do not exist as such, but are constituted by the attitude of the researcher, and would vary from researcher to researcher. This is not of crucial importance to the Giorgis since what matters is 'how the meaning units are transformed, not their size or their comparison with other researchers' (ibid., p. 33). The aim of the transformation stage is to reveal the psychologically implicit, or unarticulated, facets of the experience, and to generalise them so that they are not so situation-specific. This culminates in the final phase, where the 'essential structure' of the experience is derived from the transformations and is presented in psychological language.

In contrast to the above method, the following analysis consists of adaptations of various recognised phenomenological orientations (Colaizzi, 1973; Moustakas, 1994), but informed by the more expressive and evocative approach advocated by van Manen (1997). The intended outcome from this style of analysis is detailed descriptions which retain more of the individual's voice, while still facilitating comparison across individuals.

STEP ONE: Immersion and incubation (from Moustakas's heuristic approach, 1994). The professionally transcribed interviews[3] were re-read while listening to the original audio recordings of the interviews in order to correct and amend the transcripts. Where verbatim is inaudible, these are signified in the transcripts by [*inaudible*] or […]. Compare the transcripts to the recordings as quickly as possible after the interviews, so that inaudible sections can be filled in by accurate recollection of the interview, at least broadly, if not word for word. After the close and detailed reading of each transcript, each can be emailed back to the co-researcher to be checked and commented upon. When all interviews are transcribed, checked with the recording and corrected, and emailed to the co-researcher for possible comment, the analysis moves on to the second step.

STEP TWO: Re-read each transcript in its entirety and then again, line-by-line read more closely for implicit 'meaning units'. In this way each possible meaning unit is contextualised within the fundamental meanings of the interview as a whole. Each sentence is interrogated as to what it might reveal about the co-researcher's experience. The reading is guided by a bodily felt sense of when a meaning shifts for the individual, even subtly, and this shift in meaning is contemplated within my understanding of the entire transcript and my memory of our interview.

At this point there is caution about leaving out information that appears idiosyncratic or not especially linked with the topic under exploration. As the analysis progresses it will be possible to be slightly more discerning regarding what can be excluded at this stage. Previously excluded meanings can be *retrieved* if it emerges that other co-researchers are expressing something similar. It is also at this stage that any vestigial hopes of being comprehensive are discarded, and we acquiesce to the human limitations of such a study.[4]

However, the tendency at this stage continues to be inclusive. Each meaning unit is numbered under the heading that encompassed it, either the question it was in response to, or a general topic of which it was an instance. Overlapping, repetitive and vague expressions (too vague to be made sense of) are eliminated after repeated confirmations that they make no discernible contribution to the individual's meaning. Each transcript is analysed through all the stages, up to the listing of themes, before turning to the next transcript. I chose this procedure rather than, for example, completing the meaning-unit phase for all 20 co-researchers and then moving on to the next phase of analysis for all 20, because the analysis entails entering an individual world in some detail, and to complete that process through all the phases aids immersion in the individual's intricate presentation and inimitable

meanings. Again, initial transcripts were analysed in a more conservative way than those that were worked with later on. The analysis of later transcripts is inevitably informed by all the previous analyses, enabling more accurate discernment of which expressions were constituent for understanding the experience, individually and generally, while admitting the possibility of error and oversight. For example, from Eva's transcript we see the following construction of meaning units:

Transcript

Eva, p. 2

> Right, I'd have to say that the circumstances seem to have been prepared over a period of a couple of years at least. One year before graduating from the university, in '80, '81, the idea of leaving the country, I got the idea at least a year before I really actually left the country, and I was in the third year and I spent my holiday in the UK, met other people, and really felt very resistant at that point to come back to my country, but I knew I had one more year to complete, so I did come back to finish my final year of studies. And I spent the whole year planning and getting ready emotionally to leave the country. So, it's not something that happened overnight. It was planned and fully expected, and I just couldn't wait to leave the country for various reasons, and the actual circumstances were, as soon as I graduated there were no jobs for me, so the prospects of getting employment, a job, it really wasn't very good, and although I was in a relationship I decided, well, it's getting very difficult to find [*inaudible*], and also there were difficulties at home. So it was a way of getting away from all the difficulties related to living and in the family. I left the country on 7 July, which was a very memorable day, 1981, and I just didn't care about anything, what I was leaving behind, so, yes, that's all I can say for the moment.

Meaning Units

The circumstances of leaving home:

1 I prepared to leave over at least a couple of years.
2 I got the idea at least a year before actually leaving, in my second-last year of study.
3 I had spent a holiday in the UK and met people but had to return for my final year at university.
4 I spent the last year planning to leave as soon as I graduated, I couldn't wait.
5 Leaving was a way of getting away from a lot of difficulties at home.
6 I still remember the day I left, the date and I didn't care about anything I was leaving behind.

It is obvious here that although information is unavoidably excluded, the meaning units remain closely tied to the original language of the co-researcher, in the first person. One intention at this phase is to reduce the transcript to a more manageable length; 20 transcripts of approximately 20 or more pages each was insurmountable, given the time constraints and frame of reference of the research. This is a different process from the one described by the Giorgis, in which they moved immediately from the transcript to third-person generalised descriptions of the experience.

I had a number of reservations regarding generalising into the third person at such a preliminary level of analysis. Paramount among these was the immanent loss of the co-researcher's voice and its evocative potential to recall the interview presence for me. In addition, I was concerned that details would be minimised before I could discern whether they would be significant or not. Transforming the whole transcript into numbered meaning units was guided by my feeling of having gathered all the important aspects from each 'section' of the interview. As mentioned previously, this 'felt sense-informed' procedure was an important feature of the analysis, and compatible with the overall evocative/expressive emphasis of the study.

STEP THREE: This step involved re-reading the meaning units and 'clustering' them according to similar topics. The clusters could not yet be called 'themes' as they were not necessarily named, but just grouped according to stated and 'felt' similarity. This clustering included sensitivity to the original context so that the 'same' expression at different points was not necessarily assumed to be expressing the same meaning, and thus a 'similar' expression could be clustered in multiple places. Again, the clustering of meaning units and their subsequent

thematising blurred as more transcripts were analysed, and there was a growing familiarity with the process. However, this clustering step was maintained for various reasons; as a review of the meaning-unit step, a chance to consolidate some meaning units together, and a chance to see themes begin to emerge while remaining still with the co-researcher's language, in the first person. During this step, the researcher's voice was lost in its explicit appearance in the transcripts, in that the questions and requests for clarification that lead to certain meaning units were no longer explicitly incorporated. For example, again, the beginning of Eva's transcript which we saw earlier:

Meaning Units

From the researcher's question about 'The circumstances of leaving home':

1 I prepared to leave over at least a couple years.
2 I got the idea at least a year before actually leaving, in my second-last year of study.
3 I had spent a holiday in the UK and met people but had to return for my final year at university.
4 I spent the last year planning to leave as soon as I graduated, I couldn't wait.
5 Leaving was a way of getting away from a lot of difficulties at home.
6 I still remember the day I left, the date and I didn't care about anything I was leaving behind.

Clusters

Preparation for leaving

1 I prepared over a couple years to leave for England as soon as I graduated.
2 I read English authors and watched English films and put a lot of energy into learning English in order to have possibilities for leaving.
3 I imagined what England would be like and the kind of life I could have there.
4 Even in my early teens I was making study choices that would support my leaving. Leaving the country, getting out and not coming back, was the important thing from early on.
5 I was taking control of making it happen, not waiting to see if it might happen.
6 I spent a holiday in the UK the year before I planned to move there.

Although the language remains intimately connected to the co-researcher's words, the organisation of the material has begun to bend towards the researcher's specific interests and task. In this case there are other meaning units from slightly further on in the interview, which have been incorporated under the cluster heading 'Preparation for leaving'. This cluster title is a shift from the original 'Circumstances of leaving home', which is an abbreviation of the interview question as it was asked. At this point the title change reflects the individual's experience rather than the question it was in response to. However, as was emphasised earlier, the content is assumed to be highly interactional and not at all the product of 'subjective' solipsistic reflection. The researcher's interests remain implicit in all the steps of the analysis by having shaped the content being analysed, as well as the process of the analysis. The clusters might be viewed as invariant constituents of the experience (for this person). Though still rather amorphous, they are grouped together to prefigure core themes of this individual's experience, though not explicitly thematised yet. It is still easy to match the statements at this stage to the actual expressions in the co-researcher's transcript, and in this sense the method is similar to the stage described by many phenomenological researchers (see Moustakas, 1994, pp. 120–1). However, the clustering is an extra stage that is not explicitly used by these researchers. I felt strongly that themes could only be ascertained *after* visual clustering, still in the co-researcher's own language. To move to generalised themes in the third person *before* clustering seemed to involve an implicit conflation of procedures: clustering+thematising+generalising, obscuring much individual richness and incorporating excessive speculative introspection on the part of the researcher.

STAGE FOUR: It is only in stage four that more psychological and generalised third-person language is introduced. Themes are generated from the clusters, usually conflating different meaning units into more general statements capturing specific aspects of the experience. These themes are generalised enough to approach an approximation of 'textual description' of the 'essential features' of the

transcript, though relationships between themes are usually not themselves thematised. This can be the most uncomfortable stage of the analysis for the existential or humanistic therapist, as it introduces the most speculation and the most distance from the co-researcher's actual statements.

Though the felt sense of the original content continued to guide the formation and wording of the themes, I felt that this was the furthest level of abstraction possible in the analysis without losing the evocative sense of the experiences described. Therefore, the aspects of each theme were listed separately as points under the theme, and not consolidated further into formal descriptions for each co-researcher (either Individual Textual Descriptions or Individual Structural Descriptions), or (worse) a composite description for the whole experience under study. This was maintained as the bridge into the writing phase. In the writing, eventually something similar to a composite of experiences of 'existential migration' tentatively emerges. Below is the continuing example from Eva:

Clusters

Preparation for leaving

1 I prepared over a couple years to leave for England as soon as I graduated.
2 I read English authors and watched English films and put a lot of energy into learning English in order to have possibilities for leaving.
3 I imagined what England would be like and the kind of life I could have there.
4 Even in my early teens I was making study choices that would support my leaving. Leaving the country, getting out and not coming back was the important thing from early on.
5 I was taking control of making it happen, not waiting to see if it might happen.
6 I spent a holiday in the UK the year before I planned to move there.

Themes

Preparing oneself to leave home for a foreign country

- Learning a language, reading books about a foreign place, seeing films, can all help prepare in imagination what the foreign experience might be like.
- Wanting to leave can influence early study choices and take a lot of energy and commitment. A holiday abroad can also support leaving preparations.
- Leaving the country can seem so important that nothing is left to chance; one must take control of making it happen.

The essence of the co-researcher's experience is maintained while willingly transforming it into less individualised experience. At this stage, to retrieve the individual, and much of their evocative metaphoric language, one must return only to the previous stage, where their actual voice and descriptions remain mostly in their own words. The themes, however, are crucial, as they result in a manageable handle for each person's experience that can then be compared to others' experiences, concluding with a clustering of themes *across* co-researchers (discussed below).

STAGE FIVE: The final stage in preparation for phenomenological writing is to cluster the emerging themes for all of the co-researchers together in one list. This is analogous to the step of clustering meaning units but, in this case, the 'meaning units' are in fact co-researcher themes, and the 'clusters' are groupings of those themes across co-researchers under new 'headings', which become section headings for the writing phase.

There can be ten or so themes per co-researcher, generating a large list of themes in total to be clustered according to commonality *between* co-researchers. Each individual theme remains coded to the co-researcher who expressed it, to enable ease of frequent referencing back to the individual experience from which it emerged in order to remember the original thematic meaning, if needed. Therefore, each new 'meta-cluster' heading (formed by grouping similar individual co-researcher themes together) is supported by listing points under that heading that retrieve the individual elaborations originally listed under the themes represented. For example, Eva's three points above could be

woven into a short account of her preparations to leave for a section entitled 'The process of leaving', and likewise with other co-researchers. In this way the clustering of themes across the cohort is built upon, and remains grounded in, actual individual experience. However, at every stage there are creative transformations, not just transpositions.

Cluster headings may change or be combined if, at a later stage, previous distinctions no longer fit. Also, in addition to the list of clusters, I also gather paraphrased comments from each co-researcher regarding their feelings of the interview in order to implicitly and explicitly incorporate their affective responses.

Now descriptive writing can begin. As researcher, I have felt 'possessed' by each individual's experience in turn, and my task now is to try to point for the reader to the common and diverse in these cumulative experiences. This pointing hopefully engenders an intricate response in the reader, which approximates a holistic felt sense of the topic, beyond its idiosyncratic manifestations. Since such conceptual rendering is the aim of this project, a *major* part of the thesis is devoted to the presentation of the individual stories constituting each theme. Only after this presentation do we 'cross' the developing conceptual implications with literature and research in other disciplines, further elaborating the study's originality.

The Writing Stage

This stage is based upon van Manen's description of phenomenology as evocative writing (1997, pp. 30–4), though adapted for the peculiarities of each study. As researcher, my deep personal concern with the topic inspires my intention to explore the experience *as it is lived* by others and myself. In the hopes of re-awakening basic experiencing, I move beyond conceptualising the topic and far beyond my own initial intuitions through interaction with the co-researchers. The essential themes which have emerged for each person, and the collected themes across co-researchers, need deep reflection – distinguishing between the appearance and what grounds that appearance in experience, attempting to bring the obscure and evasive into nearness. Phenomenology is the *art* of bringing on to paper, into speech, something previously silenced and in shadow. This requires rewriting and creative use of language, but tied to faithful renderings of co-researcher experience. Van Manen warns that there are many temptations to be sidetracked, to wander, speculate, settle for preconceptions, be self-indulgent, or collapse into abstract theories. Therefore, the writer must maintain a strong and oriented relation, returning over and over again to the themes, and even earlier stages of the analysis. to assist this orientation: in other words, balancing the writing by zigzagging between specifics and deeper universals, parts and whole. It is necessary to step back and look at the total project of writing in a revealing way as well as be deeply involved in the details of the specific context (van Manen, 1997, p. 34).

A Note about Themes

In the present context, themes are conceived as co-constituted, as *constructed*, not discovered. Themes result from a co-generation of implicit experience – 'somethings' emerging intricately from 'nothing', confirmed by a felt resonance for the people involved (researcher, co-researchers, reader). But it would be misleading to suggest that these 'abstractions' from experience, these manifestations from the whole, are merely arbitrary. They may manifest and be distinguished in various different ways, but not in just any way. If these themes were purely arbitrary, the preceding research would have been unnecessary and inconsequential. We could have just asserted something and it would have been so. There must be a felt resonance, an acknowledgment that the human is a 'responsive order' constantly inviting and interacting-back with the world.[5] These themes together signify one schema for mapping a moving landscape, which will vary from person to person, time to time, and context to context, yet still a schema that reveals something of existence itself.

As a strong claim I would suggest that the interaction of co-researcher experiences and my self-reflective autobiography, within a phenomenological attitude, have 'extruded'

some significant process features of the research topic. As a weaker claim, every manifestation at least reveals *something* about the fundamental possibilities that have allowed that manifestation to arise. Even if a theme only ever manifests once, it still expands our understanding to a new edge of the overall region of that respective experience. These themes constitute one of many possible sets of themes that could bring to nascence the experience under study.

This particular set of themes is a reflection upon the biographical experience of the 21st co-researcher – myself. However, again I am adamant that these themes are not arbitrary or haphazard: their descriptive naming occurs as a consequence of thoughtful crossings of holistic experience and the ordinary language and concepts at our disposal. Themes arise at the crest of 'interactional waves' between our ways of saying and what is forever more than what can be said. Each 'wave' is added to the said, elaborating and extending what can be said next. In this sense, phenomenological *research* is phenomenological *process*; ongoing, building on what has gone before, a re-threading of personal life, psychology, literature, social science and philosophy, but never to conclusion. This task is different in quality from phenomenology that seeks to pass 'essential' fixed slices of experience from brain to brain. Useful as that is, here I am attempting to nudge something whole into being, passing it from body to body, where at the most it is felt and acknowledged, and possibly carried further without being captured.

A theme is not self-sufficient and discrete. The discussion presented under each theme heading is an amalgam of the experiences across the cohort. I am attempting to establish equilibrium between the evocative power of specifics and the theorising and research potential of the shared. It is my intention to try to consider the underlying 'existential' dimension without losing connection with the rich variety of how this dimension is realised in the course of an individual life, as evident in the interviews.

If the writing is 'successful' as phenomenology, it creates an experience that cannot be reduced to the text: it offers an opening for the reader's own self-reflections, to carry forward his or her own unreflected experiences of the topic. But what is the conventional status of such an approach? In van Manen's words,

> … all interpretive phenomenological inquiry is cognizant of the realization that no interpretation is ever complete, no explication of meaning is ever final, no insight is beyond challenge. Therefore, it behoves us to remain as attentive as possible to life as we live it and the infinite variety of possible human experiences and possible explications of those experiences. At the same time, there is no denying that this phenomenology of everyday life is a deepening experience for those who practice it. And phenomenological inquiry has formative consequences for professional practitioners by increasing their perceptiveness and tactfulness…. For the writer, these reflective experiences may even have the effect that they put one's entire existence into question. (van Manen, 2002, pp. 7–8)

Van Manen suggests that to read the phenomenological text merely for its surface message is to miss the life meaning it attempts to evoke. The text is not meant to assign unit measurements to carved-out experience or to proffer fixed conclusions, but to lure the reader into a version of the experience that is being explored. In van Manen's own words, '… the reader must become possessed by the allusive power of text – taken, touched, overcome by the addressive effect of its reflective engagement with lived experience' (2002, p. 238).

If the felt response determines the veridical status of the text, then there exists the possibility that for me as writer this text touches and moves me, but for you as reader, it remains superficial and dead. Just as certain literary texts and autobiographies move some and not others, certain phenomenological texts will address themselves to one or other, but not all.

Trying to discern themes is a dark unsettling experience for the researcher in that it *possesses*, and it 'draws one down'. It is a search for words that promise to describe, motivated in part by the desire to cling to something, even briefly. How does one relay that to a reader? This is

phenomenology 'not as a controlled set of procedures but more modestly as a '*way toward* human understanding' (van Manen, 2002, p. 249, italics added).

Various philosophers have described this uncanniness as the realm of the *il-y-a* in Levinas, the *es gibt* in Heidegger, *wild being* in Merleau-Ponty, the *Real* in Lacan, or the *khora* in Derrida – it is the frightful allure of Existence itself that fascinates the writer and the artist but that cannot be spoken. Levinas describes *il-y-a* as something that resembles what one hears when holding an empty seashell against one's ear (quoted in ibid., p. 243; source of quotation, Nemo, 1998). As if the emptiness is full, as if the silence is a murmuring, as if one hears the silent whisper of *the Real* (ibid.).

The truth that phenomenological insights are not complete, are later added to, contradicted or amended, is not embarrassing, but expected. However, it is clear also that phenomenology is about the lifeworld; it is not mere armchair speculation in the sense of removed meditative philosophy. It requires engagement for the back-and-forth interaction between the ontic and the ontological, the conceptualisable and mute responsive life. According to van Manen, the themes of the lifeworld, at its most general, include: death, life, being, otherness, meaning, mystery… which are universal across cultures and history. Other fundamental 'existentials' (as distinct from particular themes of specific phenomena) include: lived space (spatiality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (temporality), and lived human relation (relationality or communality) (van Manen, 2002, p. 110).

It all seems somewhat absurd until we begin to discern the silence in the writing – the cultivation of one's being, from which the words begin to proliferate in haltingly issued groupings, then finally in a carefully written work, much less completed than interrupted, a blushing response to a call to say something worth saying, to actually *say* something, while being thoughtfully aware of the ease with which such speaking can reduce itself to academic chatter (ibid., pp. 7–8).

This form of phenomenology empowers *the reader* to have, at the centre of their understanding, their own actual experience rather than another's concepts, by which to evaluate, elaborate or contradict others' theories, including the researcher's. This means that even those who have not shared the experience under study will have some possibility of extending the research, providing us with welcome novelty and conceptual diversity in our attempts to understand the processes of human experience.

Notes

1 See Spinelli (2005, pp.128–42) and Ashworth (2003, pp. 4–24) for excellent general introductions to the emergence and evolution of human-science inquiry. See the work of Linda Findlay (2009) for an excellent response to these issues.
2 In his *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1972), the critical theorist Jürgen Habermas rejects the positivistic claim that equates value-free knowledge with scientific facts. Empirical knowledge, according to Habermas, is formed by the human interests of those constituting it. The concrete person is also subsequently lost in the scientific subordination of the particular to the universal and abstract.
3 I personally transcribed the first two interviews in order to appreciate the difficulties of this stage of the transcript preparation.
4 From this one set of transcripts there might emerge myriad 'outcomes' just by re-positioning my reading even slightly (not to mention the variance that would arise from another researcher's reading).
5 See Gendlin (1997a), 'The responsive order', or Gendlin (1997b), *A Process Model*, for a philosophical discussion of 'interaction' and 'responsiveness' that goes beyond the scope of my task in this paper.

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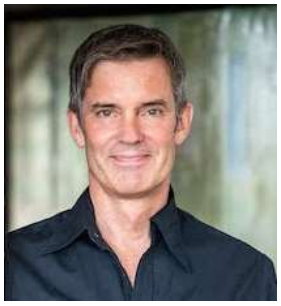
About the contributor



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