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An Introduction to the Ethics of Gestalt Research with informants

Abstract

The fact that Gestalt qualitative research, based on holistic thinking, is seen as an intersubjective process between researcher and informant raises the ethical question of how the researcher deals with the dilemma of inherent positional power. According to the ethics of interrelations, the term "conscious, ethical use of power" is suggested to highlight central aspects of the ethical responsibility of the researcher at work. In fact, this responsibility constitutes a moral obligation in all phases of the research process.

Although the aims of Gestalt therapy and those of Gestalt research are different, their ethical challenges are similar, not least when it comes to the question of dealing with the imbalance of positional power in a professionally defined relationship.

Based on holistic thinking, Gestalt qualitative research considers the interaction between researcher and informant to be a unified field of interactive subjects, fundamentally the same structures found in therapy. In most cases the informant even becomes a co-researcher in active dialogue with the investigator and accordingly, the two are co-creators at least in parts of the research process (Barber, 2002; Reason, 1988).

However, in this field of co-researchers, the professional inquirer is, whether he or she likes it or not, in a superior position. First of all the researcher is associated with the academic institution, which in itself in our Western World means authority. This authority is frequently reinforced when common sense observations from the informant are presented in academic theories, using a language which may not be easily understandable by people without the needed code for interpretation.

Secondly, the researcher has the upper hand simply because of being fully informed about the purpose of the investigation. As a matter of fact, due to this superior position, the researcher runs the risk of exploiting the other: in a qualitative interview the objective is to get as much information for data collection as possible and consequently, the interviews with the informants are conducted in order to have them tell as much as possible about their experience with a certain phenomenon. Moreover, being in control of the interview procedures, the researcher is the one who through certain techniques not only has the power to open up to experiences but also to close them off - again, always on the outlook for the best possible data for his research.

Throughout the article I will accompany my reflections with examples from practice: anonymous stories from my own and my colleagues' experiences as informants or researchers. Let us start with an illustration of how the inquirer's position as a knower is in a subtle way omnipresent in research:

> *Ann is an excellent informant because she talks freely about the sensitive theme of sorrow and shame. She works as a cleaning woman, and is not familiar with the academic world. She is invited to a qualitative interview to share her experience after the death of her son, who committed suicide three years ago. Apparently, during the conversation all went well, but in reviewing the transcript the researcher became aware of a critical point as the informant's vulnerability had been revealed because he had not fully informed her about the emotional consequences of opening up to the traumatic experience.*

In this case, the investigator is definitely confronted with basic ethical issues. First, the example shows that the researcher is the knower who definitely is more informed than Ann. Secondly, and even worse, it seems that the researcher at a certain moment is not aware of the position as a knower, or realising the problem too late.

In my opinion the field between informant and researcher – illustrated in the account above – will inevitably be characterised by an imbalance of power, an imbalance which in Gestalt terms influences the field between ethically equal subjects (Yontef & Simkin, 1989). Therefore, as power is intrinsic in the researcher's position, the question is how to make the impact of power as little harmless to the informant as possible – which in turn further leads to the basic question: How is it possible to behave ethically in a position of power? To answer this we first need to look at theory in short, using previous analyses of ethics in relationships.

The Ethics of Interrelation

Gestalt theory and practice often refers to Buber (1923) and his philosophical outlook on interrelations. Within ethics his idea of the "I and Thou" has in fact become an important guideline for how to strive for an ethically based relation between people. Together with the work of other continental philosophers Buber's analysis is considered a central element in the movement by some called the Encounter philosophy.

As the theme of this article is power in professional relationships, I also find it appropriate to highlight another of these central thinkers, namely Levinas (1906-1995), who analyses the "face-to-face" situation in terms of power and justice (Levinas, 1957). Surrmonds (1999) definitely has a point when he says that Levinas, giving priority to "the other", represents an appropriate ethical directive to change the structures of modern thinking which tend to be based on the perspective of the ego.

In his work "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity", Levinas (1957) develops the idea of how power is a function of objectifying the other in a relationship: "the other is exposed to all my powers", "he resists me with all his force and all unpredictable resources of his own freedom", finally summarised in the quantifying, objective term: "this is how I measure myself against him" (p. 48) - Usually we deal with this basic interrelational structure in a superficial and inconsiderate way.

However, there is an alternative to this easily adopted laissez-faire attitude in front of one's fellow beings. In his further discussion of interrelation, Levinas (1957), in the spirit of a humanistic face-to-face analysis, maintains that relational participants are in fact confronted with the inevitable task of decision: to choose to act in order to reduce the dominance of power. The possible success of the choice is in turn absolutely dependent on authenticity which often reveals itself in the moment of open, direct eye-to- eye contact: "true exteriority is in the gaze which forbids me my conquest" and: "the other shows himself with the absolute frankness of his gaze" (p. 48). The tendency to measure and conquer should be replaced by the chosen attitude of frankness – and one's fellow being should be perceived as trustworthy. So, face to face with the other, the I, striving for authenticity, is confronted with the necessary ethical act based on "the desire for justice and tolerance of difference". Consequently: "justice well ordered begins with the other" (p. 48).

In fact, the Levinian thinking and the face-to-face ethics in general, is associated with at least three central existentialist ideas – ideas that also are adopted in modern gestalt thinking. First the idea of authenticity which is revealed through the intentional act of the "I" recognising the other as a free individual, equal to himself, the two of "us" become a relation of intersubjectivity. Accordingly, true personality emerges within the context of relationship – a statement which is another existentialist idea, namely that of subject-subject interaction. From this point of view, in the relationship participants are both confronted with certain fundamental phenomena, co-created between them, such as respect, care, trust, responsibility. With their irreducible characteristics, these phenomena are absolute and therefore force man to decide: either to respect or not to respect the other, either to care for or not to care for the other, either to lay the ground for trust or not.

This analysis certainly calls for a closer look at a third existential subject matter: that of conscious choice. Evidently, ethical decisions are not guided by the principles of any proclaimed higher Law, but a fairly simple moral reality where an inner authority tells us to act to the best of the other. Moreover, as pointed out above, the individual should not at all be seen as a passive, objective observer, but as an active participant, capable of, even obliged to conscious choosing.

In gestalt theory, consciousness is defined as being self-reflectively aware of once ongoing sensations and reflections, or more precisely: the shifts between floating awareness of sensations and a directed, focused awareness of new understanding (Fodor, 1998). And, to our point, the important element is the second, focused awareness, because the ethical choice of interrelations requires an awareness which is intentionally directed towards the other. In fact, the crux of the matter is that only when I decide to give precedence to the other, I myself really become a living subject. It is when I realise my responsibility of being-for-the-other, interacting with the co-present other, that I at the same time become me.

The Ethical Choice of Reinstating Power

With these intersubjective structures in mind, the researcher, as any human being on any level in our modern stratified society, is confronted with this existential choice: to be interrelational just or to exert superior pow er. However, due to the professional position it is still necessary to be aware of the fact that in the relational context with the informant, the researcher is inevitably locked-up and will never be able to be completely released. The researcher's challenge is therefore

how to deal with the paradox of the double-bind: to be powerful and powerless at the same time – a paradox which Larner (1999) suggests being an unavoidable impasse: "The professional is a knower" but "has to act as if he does not know" (p. 44).

Because of the absolute character of this blind alley, the researcher is bound to actually stay in and therefore constantly live with the paradox of power throughout the process of the informant-researcher relationship. In addition, the researcher should also realise that the task in this dilemma is actually, as mentioned earlier, to minimise the researcher's potential for violating the informant.

This obligation of the inquirer to continually pay attention to these confining fundamentals in any ongoing relationship, is close to what Gilbert and Evans (2000) call a multi-perspectival view, "which involves a sensitive awareness of his own position" and "the empathic attunement to that of the other" (p. 14). These authors also underline the obvious relation between their description and other related concepts like participant-observation (Sullivan, 1953), critical subjectivity (Reason, 1994) and also inclusion, often referred to in Gestalt therapy practice (Hycner, 1993).

However, even if these terms are related to our discussion of ethics, they do not fully capture the exploitative risk inherent in positional power. It is therefore worthwhile considering a concept, or a term which hopefully not only includes the paradox of the ethical choice of using power to empower the other, but also helps us as professionals to be continually and acutely conscious of the obligation: "the ethical use of power".

As pointed out, we have to accept that power is there, and our task is to realise its proper inter-relational function. Consequently, we probably have to, as Larner (1999) puts it, "reinstate power" (p.40). The researcher releases control, or rather takes control in a new humanistic sense by being clearly conscious of the choice of letting the informant have a voice and enabling the story to be told in a free and trusting atmosphere. By being fully aware of the dangers of power abuse it will be possible to take an ethical stand to reinstate a power which empowers the other.

Because actively and consciously chosen, this kind of power is characterised by being opposite to the structurally determined one. The term "conscious, ethical use of power" is then meant to remind the researcher of the responsibility to be ethically present in the profession and continually see to it that choices are ethically defendable, and thus lay the ground for true mutual interaction.

Power and Choice in Research Practice

After this rough presentation of ethical theory, let us now summarise so far with a closer look at practice:

> *Liza is a psychotherapist who is invited to participate in a phenomenological interview. She is asked to tell about her experience in the field with one of her clients. Being aware of the possibility of violating confidentiality, the researcher follows correct procedure and calls the informant a few days afterwards. Summing up the interview with the researcher, Liza realises that she has given away some too sensitive information about one of her clients. However, through procedures of following up, the researcher contacts Liza and in the end they together find a solution to how to fulfil confidentiality.*

The example shows how the co-researcher relationship becomes the arena for ethical co-operation. As the researcher is aware of the responsibility of arranging following up procedures, she and Liza in fact create a suitable context for minimising the danger of violating the other. Liza`s client, who is indeed in the inferior position, is properly taken care of. From a relational perspective of ethics in practice, the qualitative inquirer in this way reinstates power both by preparing the procedures needed for empowering the informant in the research process, and also, by being aware of the other in the intimate, here and now interactive process.

In Gestalt therapeutic practice this relational process is understood in terms of the phases of the experiencing cycle. Although the research process has quite a few characteristics different from the therapeutic one, it is still defined as a process over time. With reference to Barber's (2002) discussion of Gestalt research process, the phases are in this analysis limited to three: the first being the pre-contact with orientation and identification, before the relation settles in the next phase with enough trust to open up to exploration, and then summarised in the final contact of resolution.

So, how can the researcher deal with the difficulties arising when aiming at a consciously aware ethical use of power?

The Pre-Contact Phase

In qualitative research the professional is the one who initiates the first contact and invites the informant into the co-researcher field. This first contact is generally made by a letter or a phone

call, later followed by a consent, which informs the participants about research procedures and the risks entailed.

Even with these initial precautionary procedures of information, the discussion above concludes that the researcher is the one who will always be in a superior position in the researcher–informant relationship. In addition, the imbalance of power is not least in the foreground in the first phase of the relational process. In fact, Fuhr (1992) suggests that the initial part of the process is comparable to the relation between parents and child. Like the parents, the professional researcher is the one who has the relatively complete overview of the further process, and the informant, like the child, is the one who has to surrender. Further, similar to the parent–child relationship, it is the professional who is obliged, especially in the pre- contact phase, to lay the ground for a trustful relationship for the informant to participate in. The researcher should clearly see the necessity of ethically applying power, and in this way build trust by supplying the participant with proper information.

But, what is proper information? The following example shows that there is no straightforward answer to this question.

> *Alice, is asked by a colleague of her therapist to take part in a qualitative interview. As she has never been part of a research project before, her only reference is the therapeutic process, and she is flattered to be asked to tell her story once again. She has received a paper which only contains time for the interview and a dotted line for signing her acceptance for taking part.*
>
> *Gilbert, who is a researcher himself, is asked to take part in the same investigation. He receives the same inadequate information as Alice, but as he is more experienced he calls the researcher to ask for more details about the procedures.*

An informed consent is the most frequent method used to inform the research participants (McLeod, 1994). However, as we see in these examples, proper information probably needs to be adjusted to the competence of the informant. It is clearly that Alice needs more exhaustive information than Gilbert. In contrast to a regular client-therapist relation with frequent meetings in familiar surroundings, the researcher-informant relation generally lacks similar stable facilities. The only tool of communication is the informed consent described above – a sheet of paper as in Alice's case, is definitely insufficient for a trustful dialogue.

According to my analysis, the basic principle of conscious, and consequently, an ethical use of power, is to continually consider one's position and also to initiate a dialogue to the best of the other. In other words, for the first phase of the encounter, which is of the outmost importance for trust in the further process, the traditional form of consent is absolutely not in all cases sufficient to guarantee that basic inter-relational principles are followed in a satisfactory way.

The Exploration Phase

In the therapeutic relationship, exploration is characterised by a deeper interaction, "themes are explored" and the "contractual level is enacted" (Barber, 2002, p.87). These two criteria reappear in the qualitative interview, with the intention to allow an open description of a phenomenon "in a particularly direct and immediate way" (Dahlberg and Halle, 2001, p.12).

In spite of being in good faith and following all rules and regulations to protect the informant during data collection, the researcher frequently does not see that these precautions may easily become a mere blind for having the informant reveal necessary data. This inadvertence may lead to a situation which reminds us of the Levinian (1957) description of how power tends to encourage us to conquer and to measure – and thus lay the ground for an inauthentic interaction with the other. As a matter of fact, the researcher from a superior position actually implicitly tells the informant: "I need your story for my research" and even more seriously: "I am the one who controls the techniques of having you tell your story".

Being acutely conscious of this "quiet knowledge" (Fuhr 1992, p.55) in the interactive process would at least decrease the obvious danger of taking advantage of the other. To illustrate this, let us have another look at practice:

> I*n a tape recorded interview, Maria, the informant, becomes excited and emotionally involved with the story of her life as a mother of her handicapped child. Suddenly, and to her own surprise, she bursts out in tears – but continues with her story. At this point, the researcher becomes particularly alert and tempted because behind the tears and a sad destiny, he detects that the informant actually reveals something which is right to the point of the theme he wants to explore in his research.*

So, how should the researcher in this example handle the dilemma on the one hand, to obtain substantial research result and, on the other, to heed the necessary precautions to protect the personal integrity of Maria? Should, in the name of science, the tape recorder be stopped and the

interview cancelled in order to take care of the informant's personal process?

As a matter of fact, the solution lies within the relation itself, provided that the researcher is aware of the obligation to stay in the impasse, and at the same time to situate the problem where it belongs: in the relationship. In this way the theme is lifted to a dialogical level of interaction, and the acutely conscious becomes the guideline for his work.

Another important point at this explorative stage is that the procedures in the qualitative research have a tendency to become technical and mechanical, because the researcher sees them - as indicated - as a tool to obtain as reliable data as possible. However, the qualitative method itself encourages the researcher to be flexible by merging with the data and being open to the phenomenological organisation of them. To strive for an authentic dialogical process between researcher and informant is in fact, as Dahlberg and Halle (2001) put it, a help "to move beyond initial assumptions and preconceptions" (p.20). Procedures, and consequently decision making, should therefore instead of being of a fixed and general character, rather be seen as flexible, based on the here and now interaction between the co-researchers, and become as Margulies (1982) summarises, "self-renewing for observational novelty" (cited in Dahlberg and Halle, 2001, p. 20). In this way gestalt researchers are reminded of the fact that that even with a holistic understanding of the co-researcher field, we are forced to be attentive to an adaptable and a dialogical behaviour.

The Final Contact Phase

In a therapeutic relation the participants debrief both the individual and their common experience together. But in research the concluding phase is easily associated with the obvious fact that the researcher, after collecting data, now satisfied, closes the door to the study. However, the interview is, like in therapy, both an individual and a relational experience, and the researcher should therefore, from the point of view of conscious use of ethics, initiate necessary procedures needed to prepare a proper closure of the co-researcher relationship. The final contact, in this respect, starts immediately after the interview, and should then be considered to last right to the very end when the informant receives a copy of the research presented in a final paper. An example:

> *James has been an informant in a qualitative inquiry. Towards the end of the interview, the researcher becomes so inspired about the ideas James has told about that he ends up in an excited monologue about the theme of his research. He becomes so involved that suddenly there is no time left for debriefing.*

The scene describes a serious breach of ethical standards in research. Again, the researcher does not seem to be aware of the responsibility of having James summing up. In order to act in accordance with the theory of empowering the other, it is of the outmost importance in this final phase of the research process that the informant is offered an opportunity to tell about and reflect on his or her experience and in this way lay the ground for a true interactive summing-up.

Summing up

So, acutely conscious ethical use of power in researcher-informant relationships can never be routine, but should be regarded as a necessary continuous awareness of a moment-to-moment process. Based on the ethics of interrelations, the term ethical use of power is suggested to highlight central aspects of the ethical responsibility of the researcher at work. This responsibility constitutes in fact a moral, unavoidable obligation in all phases of the research process, and thus also becomes a tentative guideline for qualitative Gestalt research practice.

The power of the professional follows the researcher like a shadow all through the relational process with the informant, a power which compared to that of the therapist becomes more dangerous because the researcher needs it and therefore easily uses it in his work. To live with this inherent power is to enter the realm of ethics. The only way of surviving as a true professional is to see, accept and live with the paradox: to behave ethically and exert power – simultaneously. – Apparently, once more we meet with one of our core problems as human beings: how to be free when to be free is impossible.

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