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The novice researcher and the phenomenological pilgrimage

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Abstract: The journey of a novice researcher can be a long and lonely road, which is populated by many unexpected twists and turns. This paper seeks to draw the parallels between engaging phenomenological research and psychotherapy practice to demystify what for many can seem daunting and alien. I share in this article a few of my personal experiences and reflections about reflexivity and engaging my doctoral phenomenological research process that may assist those who have started their research pilgrimage. Learning the new language of phenomenological philosophy is the start. But it is only when we traverse the bends and immerse ourselves experientially that we really get a sense of what phenomenology really requires. Perhaps, like psychotherapy, a phenomenological attitude is always unfolding work in progress.

Keywords: Reflection, reflexivity, autobiography, phenomenological research, psychotherapy

I remember the first client I saw while training as an integrative psychotherapist. I remember my anxiety about letting her down. I feared missing something important; not asking the right questions; asking too many questions; invoking shame. I was holding the need to mirror, to be present, to look for the developmental deficits, to develop rapport and obviously, the ultimate goal, to reach an I-Thou relationship, a true meeting of reciprocal attunement with the other, a moment of "silent depth as you look upon the world-order fully present" (Buber, 1923/1958, p.30). I was sweating and jittery, with so much to remember and so much I thought I could get wrong! Years down the line and I smile at how my requirement to be the perfect therapist interfered with the process of attunement and how it was only as I relaxed into the role that my ego was able to leave the room and make space for the relationship to develop.

As I settled down to do my first phenomenological interview as part of my doctorate, I found myself in exactly the same place. This time I was immersed in the need to be the perfect researcher. I feared missing something important; not asking the right questions. There was so much I could get wrong! I found myself fretting about the practical aspects of my audio recording. I was concerned that my participants would feel uncomfortable or be adversely affected by probing questions, that I would forget something pivotal, that I would miss the nuances and that I would infer too much. This list goes on. I caught myself and realised my fretting was an interruption to my ability and desire to achieve real contact and elicit essential phenomenological descriptions of lived experience during the interviews.

It was only as I embarked on perhaps my fifth or sixth interview that I forgot my agenda. I unwittingly delved into the experience of my participant, suspending my own interview

schedule and assumptions, and became more attuned to my participant's unique story. So, what had happened? Well, my belief is that it doesn't matter how many books you read on "how-to do-good phenomenology", there is a phenomenological attitude which ultimately takes time to develop. It is a way of being, as well as a skill to be learned. Our expectations to do well can sometimes interfere with the work. It may well be that the pursuit of the perfect phenomenological study is entirely elusive. Perhaps it doesn't even exist. There is so much implicit in what we read in a good phenomenology study that, for a novice researcher, the required attitude may need to be spelled out as well as practiced.

I began to realise the parallels between psychotherapy and phenomenological research. I didn't know if I was correct to link the two, but I started to appreciate that maybe both were more concerned about a "way of being "rather than "doing " and that this would take time to evolve. Had this been confirmed for me early on, I think I might have had a little more confidence in my ability to achieve it. Linda Finlay (2016) has written that there are parallels of research with the therapy process, although the goals are significantly different. If I think about "way of being", I understand now what she meant. Indeed, my goals of understanding a particular phenomenon, rooted in my own agenda, were entirely different, although there was much in the process of openness, curiosity, dialogue and relationship that felt similar.

I was inquiring about a specific existential dream phenomenon – gravity dreams (Mitchell, 2019). This was a phenomenon that had not only entered my therapy room but was an essential part of my lived dream experience. It was a phenomenon that had caused me to wonder about its meaning, its repetition, its changes over my lifetime. My participants had approached me through my study advert as they were also curious about their phenomenological experience of flying dreams. Engaging in a dialogue about an intimate part of human experience is what we, as therapists, are trained to do. I appreciated that my research interview would be a little different from that of a therapy dialogue with a therapist. I would not necessarily root out this one particular existential dream experience, rather I would wait for it to enter the room. I wondered what the real differences would be in interview from that of my client encounters. Perhaps I would talk more about context and less about emotion and embodied experience, yet the process of meaningful contact and attunement may elicit a similar outcome. Although we are not encouraging our participants to achieve insight to "better feel", we are looking for rich descriptions of lived experiences. The former, however, is quite likely to be a byproduct of the process. Not only are we engaging in a journey of "mutual discover", but there is potential for the process to be transformative for both researcher and participant (Finlay & Evans, 2009, p. 3). This has certainly been my experience.

As I entered the academic arena, attempting to achieve successful paper submissions, while writing up my thesis, I began to think about the phenomenological journey as a pilgrimage to a sacred place. A place that even to the strong of heart involves a solitary venture fraught with challenges through hostile weather conditions. A toil across deserted wastelands at great personal sacrifice. A voyage ripe with the expectation that I could get lost and success would be dependent on my ability to relinquish my mortal pride and find the truth. I realise now, having taken up this mantel across the wastelands, that the life of a pilgrim with a single-minded destination can become something of a habit, and that like psychotherapy, I could conduct it without the pitfalls of my ego. I felt able to fall into an easy and exploratory manner that no amount of reading could have prepared me for. I realised that in sharing some of my personal, pilgrimage pitfalls, as well as offering some of my revelations, I might be able to help the novice researchers who, like me, have found themselves in moments of uncertainty, confusion and overwhelm.

The Philosophy of Phenomenology

Phenomenology as a discipline has its roots in philosophy. This is something I have always felt a little intimidated by, not really considering myself a philosopher. At the start of my research project, I was only beginning to develop my academic/scholarly muscles. However, it was when I read a passage by van Manen (2016) stating his belief that researchers could be phenomenologists without being philosophers, my concern eased. Van Manen believes that studying phenomenology means developing a pathos for great texts and simultaneously reflecting in a phenomenological manner on living meanings, phenomena and events (van Manen, 2016). With this understanding I appreciated further the parallels to my practice as a psychotherapist. It is my belief that as psychotherapists we may have a propensity to reflect on the lived meanings of human experience as well as a leaning towards a philosophical attitude, without perhaps having considered it.

Van Manen describes *inception,* as "the coming upon, being struck by, or suddenly grasping an original idea, experiencing a fundamental insight, realising the depth of something" (van Manen, 2016, p. 237). I believe that this is perhaps something that many of us experience, without having known its roots in phenomenological thinking.

I found it hard initially to identify my epistemological position. I realised I tended to identify with the methodology I was looking to study at any particular time. This was a fickle position that altered depending on what I was reading. In those early stages of my pilgrimage, I found aspects of myself

identifying as a critical realist – assuming my participant accounts reflected their subjective perceptions (Bhaskar, 2013). I appreciated the commonality between phenomenology and critical realism, as an ethos entailing the ontological exploration of the relationship of both parts and wholes, as well as a belief that true understanding emerges not just from an aspects presence, but also its absence, in the concealed and hidden aspects of experience (Budd, Hill, & Shannon, 2010). Yet I also identified with a relativist approach that assumes multiple meanings and subjective realities (Arageorgis, 2017). I also found myself placed philosophically as an interpretivist, (or constructivist) believing that all data is subject to interpretation, that there are multiple meanings mediated through individual perspective and circumstance (Ponterotto, 2005). I went around in circles, feeling unsure of my "identity" and wondering whether these positions needed to be overt and set-in stone, or whether I could operate within a continuum? I began to recognise how phenomenologists themselves are very split in their epistemological commitments. Some sound distinctly more "realist" (Budd et al., 2010) while post-structural, post-modernist and feminist phenomenologists, who engage with artful, reflexive, multi-vocal forms, appear distinctly interpretivist and relativist (Fisher, 2010).

Therefore, I finally decided to call myself a pluralist, epistemologically, believing that there is no single answer to the central questions of human existence, that it is not possible to find an absolute or fundamental truth and that different sources of knowledge have their own validity (McLeod, 2017). This position sits reasonably, comfortably, with my being an integrative psychotherapist. I also recognise that my preferred version of hermeneutic phenomenology, which engages in reflexivity, puts me firmly on the interpretivist path and is definitely not a "realist" stance, whose "position maintains that the world is made up of structures and objects which have cause and affect relationships" (Finlay & Evans, 2009, p. 20). I recognised my more relativist position that would entertain a diversity of interpretations (Mohanty & Carr, 1989). I realise that in choosing pluralism, I am sitting somewhere on the critical realist-relativist spectrum, recognising the fluidity of meaning and a world that is interpreted subjectively, and that I am remaining open to all psychological ideas and models (McLeod, 2017, p. 13). In many ways I am seeing philosophical research concepts "not as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle but rather the outcome of throws of the dice" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p.37). This was a grounding that I realised played out as I collated my results and as I was immersed in my conclusion and discussion. I began to see the myriad of detours that my pilgrimage could have taken, had I adopted differing positions, not just methodologically, but in the lens I was using as I drilled in on certain aspects of the phenomena I was studying. As I grappled with how the experience had taken shape and endured in the lives of my participants.

It is said that phenomenological research, like philosophy, begins in a sense of wonder, that creates an openness to the world and a "wondering attentiveness that is the trigger for phenomenological enquiry" (van Manen, 2016 p.36). I realised that while I may not identify as a philosopher, one of the core heuristic qualities of phenomenology is to "stand in 'wonder' before the world" (Adams & van Manen, 2017). This sense of wonder resonated with me as a therapist. Hycner, as an existential phenomenologist and psychotherapist, puts his finger on this way of being:

> If I'm not amazed at least once during a session, that's an indication to me that I'm either "burned out," or I'm not in touch with a larger sense of what is going on for this person, and between us. (Hycner, 1993, p. 112)

While I didn't set out to engage wonder, it happened as I reflected more and more on my research question. I fell into wonder. I wondered about why my subject of gravity dreams. Why was it so important to me? What did the experience mean to my participants? What was essential to the experience? I realise now the philosophical leanings in these questions. I can also appreciate that as I came into illumination regarding my phenomenological thematic aspects, I was experiencing a different state of wonder than that which I had started with. I realised that, like Moustakas's phases of knowledge, my sense of wonder went through a process in itself, from my initial engagement with the subject to full illumination. Followed by a feeling of something akin to a religious experience, an agape, that was deepened by my own phenomenological experience of my subject (Moustakas, 1990). These different states of wonder were identified in Paula Seth's doctoral thesis on Wonder (Seth, 2017). She described three interconnected overarching themes. The first being the experience of wonder as a state of *openness,* in which the therapist dwells unknowing. The second being the *embodied, deeply relational* dimension of wonder, where we are fully present with the other. The third and final aspect of wonder is that it is a profoundly *renewing experience:* a birthing place for new knowledge and therapeutic discovery (Seth, 2017).

My pilgrimage as a researcher – my voyage of self-discovery – has taken five years so far and while I am still committed to the idea of a destination, I am wondering whether there is actually a place where there is no more learning to be had. Perhaps if that were the case, I would have to begin another pilgrimage, just so I could continue to look at a new horizon with curiosity. If my journey had not originated from a place of wonder, I would not have maintained my interest. I believe this is also the case for my journey with psychotherapy. I still experience a sense of wonder at the essential experience of my client's death anxiety, or experiences of trauma. I believe that philosophically our desire to reflect on the lived meanings of experience facilitates our philosophical reflectiveness and

intrigue. However, this pathos still needs to be disciplined in order to be a productive phenomenological reflection and this, I believe, is perhaps where I needed a little help as I embarked on my road of research (van Manen, 1990).

Not Doing What I Set Out To Do

During the submission process of my first phenomenology paper to this *European Journal for Qualitative Research in Psychotherapy*, my paper was peer reviewed. At least one reviewer, I believe, was a senior academic researcher. The experience of receiving the reviewers' comments was challenging. It also offered me the most useful feedback and teaching on my doctoral journey. The exercise of working through the reviewers 'comments proved invaluable.

I had spent a long time researching my questions and the methodology (which I had believed to be an existential phenomenological study) and felt reasonably assured about my position. Imagine my shock when I received the comment that my study was not really phenomenological! Instead, the reviewer suggested my methodology was better characterised as a phenomenologically orientated thematic analysis. My surprise was great, not least because this was a study that had been passed by my awarding body, but also because I had been fairly sure I had adhered to the methodology.

It was on reading an article online that I discovered that this is quite a common mistake among novice researchers. The article said, "there is a discrepancy between the reported use of a brand-name method and the actual used procedure, which may be idiosyncratic or even inspired by a method of a different name" (Timulak & Elliott 2019, p. 10). While I set out to do one methodology with all the best intentions, I didn't quite achieve it.

At that point I went into something of a confused spin. Prior to my publication, every part of me believed that I had adhered to "rules" and had engaged an existential phenomenological methodology; however, with the external scrutiny, I began to question if I really had. To this day, I'm still trying to work out the conundrum of what is or is not phenomenology. Now, with hindsight, I understand my confusion is paralleled in the field. Many phenomenologists are arguing amongst themselves. These debates are important, and I realised my certainty had been a little naïve (if understandable). I hadn't properly engaged in a phenomenological attitude involving the epoché (Finlay, 2008). In order to engage in the epoché and the hermeneutic process, I had to bring myself into the study. I realised that I hadn't employed enough of the reflexive methods necessary to be convincing. Halling tells us "the gap between research as practiced and research as described in texts speaks to the importance of learning through practice and observation" (Halling, 2020, p. 7). How can we really know what the pitfalls are until we have entered the process of research itself?

On the positive side, I also now realise that I had, in fact, engaged a good existential study. It just wasn't quite "phenomenological" enough. I had fallen into the trap of hearing one reviewer's opinion and had felt I had got it all wrong. Part of my journey was to see that I had got quite a lot right, too. This is part of the human condition. We struggle to see what is good in the shadows of what is not good enough.

Another piece of feedback I received from reviewers was that the number of themes I had created was too high and that I needed to reduce them, as well as look at how I had named them. "They don't tell me about the phenomena", one critic said. I started to look again at phenomenological studies and see that four themes were probably the standard and the themes used did describe a phenomenon. They weren't one-word themes that I had used. They were not themes that spoke to my audience or brought life to the phenomena. I spoke to my academic advisor, who told me that this happens; papers have to be re-written, but really the results were the same, which indeed they were. I went through the process of taking out the less inductive codes and only publishing the codes that spoke about the phenomena itself. The process was invaluable, even if it precipitated a crisis of faith. How did I manage to make this error? What did this say about me as a researcher? I realised that I was simply a novice researcher, who had learned through her mistakes, just as we do in life, when we take a bend too fast in the car, or we run with our hands loaded, or talk with our mouths full. Is it not the same when we embark on research?

What I did do, though, was return to all the books on methodology. This took resilience. Sometimes it is difficult not to take rejection personally. However, I needed to understand where I had gone wrong. Or, perhaps, it was more "if "and "how" I might have gone wrong. How could I do things differently this time? I realised that in retrospect that I had actually managed to conduct a study that didn't include any of the personal reflections and reflexivity that was required. I had not included myself in my study. I had not detailed my responses to my participants or my own personal experiences and assumptions, which I realised were important for a good phenomenological paper.

Phenomenology is a methodology that advocates the research to be both in the enquiry and in the writing. I knew my personal experience was deep and my experiential reality wasn't necessary rational or logical, but was rich in description and

poetry, and I'd failed to include it. I had missed an opportunity to start with my own primal telling, to conduct a reflective study based on my own pre-reflective experience. "Phenomenology, not unlike poetry, is a poetising project; it tries an incantative, evocative speaking, a primal telling, wherein we aim to involve the voice in the original singing of the world "(Merleau-Ponty as cited in van Manen, 2015, p. 13). While I believe I had shed light and brought alive an existential phenomenon, I had only offered part of the story.

Phenomenology originates from a true sense of wonder, a suspension between what is known or unknown. It involves the collection of lived experience accounts, through interviews, written descriptions and literature, to breathe life and understanding to the phenomena followed by re-writing these accounts to form stories, or anecdotes (Adams & van Manen, 2017). I could have embedded my study in my own heuristic experience. I could have placed myself in the voice of my participants and yet, somehow, I missed the point. I believe that there is so much to digest with all the different methodologies that are available to researchers. We can read so much and yet we can so easily miss a vital crossroads in our journey. I needed the experience of not doing what I set out to do to make me more vigorous with my methodology a second time. I needed the experience of putting myself into my research in order to engage in a fuller reduction, to work out what I had taken for granted and let my existential dream experience show its true essence.

For the final project of my doctorate, I chose to engage *Phenomenology of Practice* by van Manen (2016). Phenomenological traditions usually follow either a descriptive (Husserl, 1980) or a hermeneutic methodology (Ricoeur, 2004; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The main reason for rejecting a purely descriptive methodology was that I realised that my project had started from a position of interpretation, my previous study, and my personal fore-understandings. Finlay (2011) describes numerous hermeneutic phenomenological routes I might have gone down; van Manen's work resonated and fitted nicely in that it allowed for both description and hermeneutic interpretation. I sought to grasp the essential meaning of an intangible existential dream phenomena and there was something permission-giving in van Manen, who stated that phenomenology is interested in "anything that presents itself to consciousness, whether the object is real, imagined, empirically measurable or subjectively felt" (van Manen, 2015, p. 9). It requires a hermeneutic ability to make sense of the lifeworld, through the description of what may have been taken for granted. This felt achievable.

My hermeneutic Cycle

As I began to reflect on my hermeneutic understandings, through my own heuristic experiences I realised that there was in fact a hermeneutic cycle (figure 1) that I engaged in as I progressed with my research. I oscillated between my fore-understanding, which began with my own sense of wonder of my subject, to my implicit pre-understandings as I conducted my literature research. This was then related to my hermeneutic understandings of the experiences of my participants as I engaged in my interviews. Alongside this were their own hermeneutic understandings of their experience, with all their implicit pre-understandings. My participants and I then engaged in a reciprocal hermeneutic exploration of their experience of the phenomena through mutual reflection and dialogue. At times there may have been resistance if the participants challenged any ideas, I may have had ideas that they didn't agree with. The cycle, while concluding with my explicit understandings of the phenomena, was continually looping back to my fore-understanding and my implicit understandings that I described in my own narrative and assumptions.

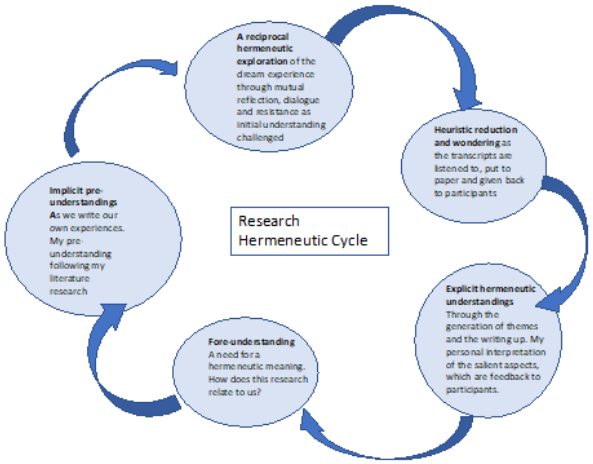

Figure 1: Hermeneutic Cycle

I remember very vividly a workshop on transference and projections during my training. At the time I thought I had been provided with a secret code to human interaction. I was shocked by the level with which we assign our assumptions and personal experiences to that of others. I began to see a web of projections from each course participant; the implicit, the explicit, the intangible human beliefs of self and other. This started me thinking about how we conduct hermeneutic cycles without awareness, as we do dream analysis, or client work.

We hold in mind our fore understandings (that have become implicit in our learning), our projections, our personal experiences and the visual clues we are presented with. Perhaps as we engage in the work, we may enter a cycle of feedback and reciprocal hermeneutic exploration. Even as we write up our case notes we might go back to the session and explore further. This doesn't necessarily mean that we are feeding back our interpretation to our clients (this maybe something we hold in mind), but it takes the concept of a hermeneutic cycle out of an abstract research concept and into the everyday.

Acquiring a Researcher Attitude – Something you may already know

I felt very overwhelmed by the necessity to be reflexive, realising this to be a shortcoming in my initial study and I tried hard to work out what this actually looked like. However, I realised that there is something of this attitude that comes with our training as we engage in our case studies or during supervision. Although at many points I had been reflexive, I hadn't really spelled out where I was in my research. I recognised that some reflexivity comes with relaxation and it comes with practice. It comes when we aren't in a state of overwhelm and panic. It comes in the before, the middle and the after. There is a balance between what we know explicitly and implicitly, it is in the dance, the "glide" that Finlay describes, through a series of improvised steps of reductive focus and reflexive self-awareness. The phenomenological attitude required involves the need to suspend everything we ourselves take for granted, but also to open ourselves up to be "moved by an Other, where evolving understandings are managed in a relational context" (Finlay, 2008, p. 3). I was required to be open and curious, in the context of a relationship. I could do this. I realised this was actually a permanent state for me in my clinical practice. Perhaps if I had taken time to appreciate the parallels of the researcher attitude to that of a therapist earlier on, I would have had a little more confidence in my ability to achieve reflexivity. It may have felt more inherent and less like something I needed to acquire. I now see it as an attitude that is perhaps deepened through research, and one that lasts beyond the journey and becomes integral to who we are.

Van Manen describes the phenomenological approach as being one of openness, describing a need to reflect on one's own pre-understandings, frameworks and biases, our subjective feelings, preferences and inclinations (van Manen, 2016 p. 42). These being the pitfalls that may seduce us towards a wishful or one-sided understanding of a phenomena as cited in (Finlay, 2008). This is why I felt it was imperative to engage in my own primal telling, my own story of wonder, before unveiling the voices of my participants. This enabled me to fully put aside what was mine. I also engaged in a journal, where I described my emotional responses to my participants as well as my moments of awareness as I danced between the commonalities that we all shared and those we didn't. I knew that given my own experience of the phenomenon I was studying that a complete and absolute reduction was impossible, and this was also something I had learned during my literature review (Merleau-Ponty & Landes, 2013).

Sela-Smith (2002) talks about engaging in heuristic self-search as potentially causing a methodological ambivalence, with the inclusion of participants being a distraction from the internal process. This potentially causing a dissociation, with the tacit dimension not being entered. I have to disagree with this. My initial self-reflections enabled me to be quite concrete about what my biases were, so that when it came to be entering the experiences of others, I could see new things. This is more indicative of a descriptive phenomenological methodology, whereby one aspires to "bracket" assumptions, or at least name the biases that may affect the work. For me, it was a preparatory step that enabled me to set a scene on which to begin my engagement with the subject, second time around.

Reflexive Bodily Empathy

This is a research tool that I believe we probably engage in intuitively in our psychotherapy practice and can be found in our somatic resonances and countertransference. It is also something that is easier to engage in when we are a relaxed researcher, when we are totally flowing in the moment, in the experience of "other". "Reflexive bodily empathy "(Finlay, 2008) is also something that I may not have knowingly engaged in, but that perhaps my training had facilitated, and I engaged in unwittingly. Finlay talks about "re-membering": she says it is not just a cognitive function, it is about reiterating responses in the body reflection which can occur during and after the encounter (Finlay, 2008). The aim of this reflexivity is to see through "fresh eyes "(Finlay, 2008). I realised that engaging in an embodied intersubjective relationship with my participants enabled me to "be with" them, that my empathy was not just in the listening, but it was an embodied form of understanding, as I intuited their posturing, even after the interview.

Attunement

Siegel describes this as being alert, astute, attentive, aware, careful, heedful, thoughtful, wary, watchful, wide-awake and wise (Siegel, 2010). In educational terms, it is not prematurely closing off possibilities or being judgmental. The act of attunement seems at first to be an ideology, and yet, with careful attention on the other, and attempting to take their

essence into our own world, it soon becomes quite habitual. This is something I noticed after the first few minutes of the interview process. I took for granted that as a psychotherapist, I maximise contact, using eye contact, paying attention to facial expression, tone of voice, posture, gesture and the timing and intensity of the response of my participants.

At times, my preconceptions, preunderstandings and predilections may have got in the way, and this is always going to be the case as one human being meets the boundary of the other. However, with careful attunement and very careful listening, I was able to pull myself from the other, to find my participant's hermeneutic truth, this being achieved in co-creation. I am aware that the aspiration of attunement and deep dialogue comes from an ideology of *I-Thou* relatedness (Buber, 1923/1958). I believe I was able to achieve this in all my interviews, through the sharing of a phenomenon that was powerful and emotive, through my attentive listening and affirmatory feedback. Also, through the power of mirroring, in the "between"of the interview, in which both myself and the participant were wholly engaged, in the vulnerability and the exposure of the content. The invitation of research provided a platform to explore a private aspect of my participants' existential lived experience. This alongside the dialogical relationship enabled an openness that gave birth to vivid description of previously hidden material.

It is also important to talk about my attitude of openness. This is something that as a therapist and researcher I strive towards. It is not just an openness in my way of being, but I have attempted to be open to the subject itself and the different subjective experiences of my participants. I am attempting to be open now, as I bare my soul, my journey and my failures. I was aware then that my realities might not be the realities of others, that each participant may well have an entirely different reality to the other. I sought to keep a balance between scientific openness, my own personal prejudices as well as the social, historical and cultural embeddedness of the subject. I was attempting to see this phenomenon with fresh eyes:

> When we encounter familiar objects, we tend to see them through familiar eyes and thus often miss seeing novel features of familiar situations. Hence by understanding that the given has to be seen merely as a presentational something rather than the familiar "object that is always there", new dimensions of the total experience are likely to appear. This is what is meant when phenomenologists say they want to experience things. (Giorgi, 2016, p. 249)

Resonance and Validation

One of the goals of my interviews was to reach some form of resonance with my participants. This, as Siegel tells us, "is the coupling of two autonomous entities into a functional whole. A and B are in resonance and each attunes to the other. When such resonance is enacted with positive regard, a deep feeling of coherence emerges with the subjective experience of harmony" (Siegel, 2010, p. 54). This is part of the process of "participant validation "and is one of the ultimate tools used in this research for validating my research conclusions. Participant validation was used during the interviews, in the questions and the feedback, as well as in the process of feeding back the transcripts and the themes. It was sought both overtly through the linguistics used in the interview transcripts and emails, but also covertly through the witnessing of participant behaviour, affirmations and body language. Resonance was one of the major means by which I validated my research. I believe that the act of resonance and validation is integral to our work as psychotherapists, however, during my first study I did not feedback my themes to my participants, which I feel in retrospect was an error. Receiving affirmation that my participants could see themselves in the thematic aspects in my final study was the greatest validation of my work. I would agree with Karp who tells us "that the ultimate value of a study's worth is that the findings ring true to people and let them see things in a new way" (Halling, 2020, p. 8).

Empathy Found in the Writing

Writing up my participants "anecdotes" was the most revelatory and emotional experience I have had so far as a researcher. The attitude required for writing anecdotes requires a slow, meditative way and attends to, even magnifies, all the details (van Manen, 2016). I found the process of writing, albeit re-writing, the participants' stories enabled a deeper level of empathy because I wrote in the present tense, first person, fully engaging myself into their experiences. There was something about telling their story as if it were my own that enabled a greater connection to the essential experience of my participants. The concept of empathy with my participants parallels what therapists aspire to in the therapy room, as we leave our lives behind us, as we enter the I-Thou dialogue (Buber, 1923/1985). The writing of anecdotes is a methodological fast track to entering the world of our participants' experiences. At the time of interview, we may hold in mind a desire to engage in reflexive body empathy, resonance and attunement. There is something of a reflective stance that is given with time and distance. As we scroll through the transcripts and re-write the text, the reflective

distance facilitates a body re-membering, a voice, an illumination to what we knew, but didn't know we did. This is something that van Manen describes: not knowing what we know (van Manen, 2016, p. 47). It is a noncognitive knowing, a nonconscious consciousness. It is as if in the moment itself, something shifts from the bowels of our awareness and lifts itself into our fore understanding. The most bizarre element of this for me was that, in hindsight, I did know what I knew, but I only knew it after I had entered the horizons of my participants.

Reflexive Analysis During and After the Interview

During my interviews I was aware of myself as the researcher. There was also something of myself as a therapist, as I noticed myself asking questions, such as, "what was that like for you? " I was aware that as the participants were re-telling their dreams, they were being re-lived and I was witnessing their dream unfolding into the "now". Todres (2007) tells us that at this point of the interview the researcher needs to stay with this and *stand-with* the participant and encourage more description. This is where, as a novice researcher for my first study, I fell down. I was so anxious about achieving the interview and asking the questions, verbatim, that I did not allow for free flow. I was able in hindsight to change this with my final project. I could be attentive and "be-with" the participants in their experience.

It was also important to detail my intersubjective reflexivity, in terms of my transferential responses to my participants, but also the intersubjective realm that will have existed between both parties (Finlay & Evans, 2009). At times my "wounded child" will have almost certainly met theirs, as well as the therapist in me meeting with the therapist in them. Detailing my responses in my journal as well as in the transcripts was pivotal in order to be transparent. This was not something I did in my first study. I had enjoyed reading phenomenological studies very much, but somehow, I had failed to realise that I needed to be in the process. A process that I was part of, that I was embedded in.

I was emotionally impacted at many different intervals during my research journey. I found that when listening to the interviews, when I no longer had the "ego" function, worrying what I was saying and if was going to miss something vital, I would become more involved with their story. After the interviews, as I listened again to the audio recordings, I would also notice how I had missed something. I had jumped in too soon, or I had not asked a question that in retrospect I wish I had. However, I was far more able to fully immerse myself in the participant experiences, from different aspects of my lived experience: an optimist, a spiritual individual, a mother, a daughter, and partner.

Finlay (2012) talks about five mutually dependent and iterative processes for practising phenomenology and alongside embracing a phenomenological attitude, which I felt came with time, she also talks about entering the lifeworld of the participants and dwelling with horizons of implicit meanings. The dwelling felt like part of my hermeneutic cycle. I found that my head was full and confused for days, as if there was something at the tip of my awareness. I wasn't able to sleep properly, I would return, again and again to the texts, waiting for something to reveal itself to me. I realised that it is impossible to find the implicit meanings, without this process of rumination, which at times felt like exacerbating stagnation. I wish someone had told me at the time it was actually part of the process. That things go blank for a while, but much is happening behind the scenes.

Ethical Considerations

A couple of my colleagues asked me whether I had written my ethical section yet. There was something about this which I felt was the least exciting, most dull aspect of my thesis. However, on closer inspection it is an aspect of psychotherapy that is paralleled in research. Obviously, the informed consent differs from our therapeutic contract, but our data protection and confidentiality agreements are not dissimilar, albeit we need to think of future publications and participant anonymity. The foundational ethical principles of any medical practice are *nonmaleficence*, which is to cause no harm, to have *respect for a person's autonomy*, meaning freedom of action and freedom of choice as well as *fidelity.* Qualities of loyalty, faithfulness, integrity and honesty fall under this heading as well as trustworthiness. My ethical values as a psychotherapist are bound by the code of ethics of my governing bodies; the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) and Metanoia University and Middlesex University. My philosophical principles were integral not only to my research, but also to my reflexivity.

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that addresses the questions about how we should act towards each other, that pronounces judgements of value about actions and develops rules of ethical justifications. It is in essence the philosophical study of morality (Kitchener & Anderson, 2000). It goes without saying that *trustworthiness and integrity* are central to the role of a psychotherapist. Trusting someone implies that we can rely on their character, their intention, their morality. Trustworthiness is also central to the role of the researcher. Kitchener and Anderson tell us that if the researcher is not trustworthy, neither is their research (Kitchener & Anderson, 2000). I

believe that my trustworthiness is demonstrated through my transparency in my journal writing, in my self-reflectivity and transparency with my informed consents and my transparency with my attitude and openness during the interviews themselves. There is also the consideration of my practical wisdom, which is perhaps seen in knowing when to intervene with a line of questioning, as well as the employment of values of care, compassion and empathy (Kitchener & Anderson, 2000), which are all integral to the therapist as well as the researcher and are values that most of us as practitioners aspire to.

Practice-based research involves ethical guidelines which put the client's interests first, with the research relationship being equal and not exploitative (Bager-Charleson, 2012). With my anecdotes I have stayed very close to the factual truth. I made sure that their names are changed and that they have had an opportunity to read the transcripts and report back on my themes. This has felt so important. Partly for triangulation of my findings, but also in terms of demonstrating my openness. I was inviting validation, criticism, and dialogue. This comes with incredible anxiety. To spend so many months embedded in a subject, to then send it out into the world for rigour, is a terrifying experience. What if I offend my participants? What if they don't see what I see? What if I have spent all this time coming up with thematic aspects that they disagree with?

Living Phenomenology

It was during the process of analysis in my last study that something started to happen. As I started to code, line by line, looking for the nuances, the hidden meanings, in each text, I discovered I was looking at the unsaid – the eye rolls, the pauses, the sighs. I then found myself scanning through any line of text (in a newspaper, for example) and going through the same process. I would watch a woman cross the road and I would notice the slump of her shoulders and the intake of her breath. I would notice my feelings, my projections, in response to what I was watching. In my psychotherapy sessions I would be clinging onto a phrase, I would be taking it out of the sentence and then adding it back in, changing it and trying to grasp how essential the word was to the experience being described.

I found that the mere act of engaging in this way, of looking at people's lived experiences, was changing the way that I was looking at the whole world. It was as if I was seeing a subtlety to life that I had never seen before. I was viewing the whole world as a written text. I was looking for inductive codes in the dialogue I was having with my children and my friends. It was on reading an article on phenomenology that I realised that I wasn't going mad. Students who study phenomenology "tend to look at their lived experiences with more attentiveness to the subtleness of lived meaning" (Adams & van Manen, 2017 p. 781). I then noticed the change in my clinical practice. My abilities to see between the lines of dialogue, to look for the unsaid and the inductive themes, had been heightened. This new way of being was providing new depth to my work. This, I believe, is a real tangible product of phenomenological research; it has provided me with new tools to offer in my practice.

The period of immersion in my subject and my methodology caused me restless nights, with what felt like small glimmers of something that felt big, but I felt unable to see its shape, size or what it could look like. Eventually, I finally sensed something tangible emerging from the data. I had moved from looking at the subject from the outside to now being well and truly on the inside of the data. I was very relieved to find Cornelius Verhoeven describe this experience perfectly as the "state of suspension between the grasped and the ungrasped" (Haas, 1972). It was something that I could almost feel, yet sometimes it would elude me. At times it felt like madness. I realised as I came into illumination regarding themes that I was experiencing the state of "wonder" I had seen described in the literature of van Manen. My wonder went from a wondering about the subject to a fully immersive wonder as I realised what the subject actually meant to me personally. This echoes Seth's work on the achievement of new knowledge and discovery through wonder (Seth, 2017).

My personal responses to my heuristic enquiry

I think it is paramount that novice researchers are made aware of the emotional journey they are embarking on. If I hadn't had colleagues who were undergoing similar emotional roller coasters, I would have probably given up. Moustakas (1990) described six heuristic research phases. The first initial engagement with the subject was my occupation in the literature and writing of my own personal reflections (a heuristic self-search) and experiences. This was a difficult and painful piece to write as I looked back over my own childhood experiences. The second phase involved full immersion of the subject. This was the point at which I was engulfed in a wave, or perhaps many waves, of sheer panic. The data itself felt too big, the meanings too many, and my six week-long headache began. At the stage of incubation, I began to feel the data sinking further into my conscious and possibly unconscious level (hence my vivid dream world) and I had an almost tangible feeling of something emerging. A sense of grasping or understanding from the inside, what this phenomenon truly does mean. At this point, the panic that I had been living with shifted and I began to feel the vaguest sensation of hope. I think this was the beginning of the fourth phase, of "Illumination", where new understanding and revelations

occur, when the hidden meanings begin to reveal themselves in a "how can you not have seen this before" awareness. An example of this was the connection between what every participant described as a search for their authentic self, or a crisis of identity and their experience of gravity dreaming. I realised the parallels between my participants' experience and that of my own. The parallels between the findings of my topic and my desire to become a researcher. My identity was growing consolidating through the subject and the act of research.

In the process of *explication,* trying to explain how I had derived at my findings, I started to integrate the findings into a more theoretical framework, to make conscious and understandable something that has been lurking within me for all of my life. To finally be able to give a voice to my experiences and unite it with the voices of others has felt beyond validating. The final phase of *creative synthesis* has perhaps been the easier task.

The Benefits and Dangers of a Critical Friend

Some of the difficulty of doing certain phenomenological methodologies is the lack of a clear structure. Van Manen provides guidelines on writing anecdotes, however, when it comes to a clear methodology there are no strict guidelines. Indeed, van Manen cautions against "method" prefers to see his approach as an orientation (van Manen, 2016).

During my thematic analysis I utilised a critical friend, who is a university academic, working in a Psychology department. She initially went through my themes and then attributed her own, which were very similar. This was very reassuring. However, I got thrown off the scent when my critical friend talked about coding frequencies and coming up with certain measures in order to generate an interrater reliability. I set off looking at doing this and then realised that this detracts from a van Manen methodology, which is against the concept of computer-generated programs, saying that the methodology "contrasts with other qualitative methods and approaches that require repetition and may involve technicaliization, and comparison of outcomes, trends, and the indexing of data " (van Manen , 1990, p. 29).

This was a very pivotal part of my journey as a novice researcher. In phenomenological research, I think it is very easy to think we have overlooked something and adopt a method of thematic analysis, such as Braun and Clark, which may detract from the methodology you are looking to seek to achieve (Braun & Clarke, 2013). However, it takes confidence in your methodology to say "no" to a critical friend, who is perceived as knowing far more and is a researcher by profession. As novice researchers, we naturally lack confidence and assume others know more.

Generating themes in the phenomenology of practice is the experience of focus, of meaning, of point. A theme is a form of capturing the phenomenon that we are trying to understand. It gives shape to the shapeless (van Manen, 1990). Van Manen refers to the process of theme analysis as recovering the theme or themes that are embodied and dramatised in the evolving meanings and imagery of the work (van Manen, 2015, p. 88). It is not, according to van Manen, a rule-based process but a free act of "seeing meaning". Themes can be understood as structures of meaning, an attempt to grasp the pedagogical essence of the lived experience. He provides a series of statements, which outline some of the phenomenological qualities the themes should contain:

1) The needfulness or desire to make sense
2) the sense we are able to make of something
3) the openness to something
4) the process of insightful invention, discovery, disclosure

Van Manen then suggests that we look at the how the theme relates to the notion of the phenomenon.

The Juxtaposition

I believe there is a juxtaposition experienced by many researchers who are needing to fulfil the requirements of a doctorate. While I was required by my methodology to explore the essential aspects of a phenomenon, I was also required by my awarding body to make my research applicable to the field of psychotherapy as a whole. My research questions sought to tease out the experiences of the phenomenon, alongside the experiences of the lived world. My participants were actually psychotherapists and I was keen to explore the impact that the phenomenon in discussion had on their therapeutic journey. However, I was aware that in the process of understanding the implications on practice, I was detracted from my methodology, which was to simply explore, to sit alongside an experience and witness life being breathed into the phenomenon. There was a juxtaposition between my phenomenological philosophy, as an ideal, and my brief, to doctor our field of Psychotherapy. I felt that, for me, there needed to be a middle ground, to sit with the phenomenon and apply aspects of my research to our discipline. This meant that it didn't fit entirely to the ideal of pure phenomenology. At this point of my journey, I imagined I was on a tight rope, at the end of which was an intersection, with no clue as to which route to take.

I believe that while one attempts to adhere to a methodology with all the best intentions, we may deviate unwittingly. There has been a heated debate between phenomenologists

regarding what is actually considered a phenomenological philosophy, and van Manen has stated that many studies that call themselves such are "not commensurate with the general scholarly accepted idea of phenomenology "(van Manen, 2017, p. 775). I aspired to look for the primal, lived, pre-reflective, predicative meanings of an experience. I sought to understand themes and insights through the use of providing what I believed were reflective texts, alongside the therapeutic journey of my participants. However, is it possible to adhere to this purely when we have competing agendas? It is as if we are serving two masters: phenomenology and our research institute. One of the final themes that I uncovered was actually a biproduct of the phenomenological experience of the interview itself.

Halling, however, tells us that there are numerous examples of modifications of phenomenological philosophy, not least done by Amedo Giorgi himself when he developed descriptive phenomenology. He actually poses the question, "who has the authority to define what constitutes phenomenology?" and he argues that "as researchers we possess our own authority based on a richness of experience arising from our practice – our successes and our failures and the learning that these made possible" (Halling, 2020, p. 4). He goes on to say we should consider the fact that these phenomenological philosophers were neither scientists or researchers. "[U]nlike us, they didn't have to contend with the realities, quandaries, and problems that arise as one carries out an empirical phenomenological research project". He calls for a "broad and elemental view of phenomenology" and draws on Merleau-Ponty who believed that there are multiple ways to practice phenomenology. Does it mean that my research is not valid if all the thematic aspects I attributed were not pertinent to just the phenomenon, or can I be satisfied that I have produced an "informative, illuminating and enlightening result" as Halling (2020, p. 8) recommends?

Final Words

This paper has sought to humanise my research journey and detail some of the pitfalls I have encountered. As a long and lonely pilgrimage, the journey can be very overwhelming. It is easy to write and read about how to acquire a phenomenological attitude, however, I believe that it is only as we traverse the bends and immerse ourselves experientially that we really get a sense of what it really requires. Perhaps, like psychotherapy, a phenomenological attitude is always developing and that the pursuit of perfection is quite simply an ideal.

If you are reading this as a budding researcher, have faith that as a psychotherapist you already have many of the skills that are required and that you are not alone when you hit the dead ends. A pilgrimage is a journey that is shared, and it does come at personal cost. I believe that this is just further material to reflect upon, to grow with. Becoming a phenomenologist has made me a better, more curious and passionate therapist, and I am keen to travel the road further. Be kind to yourself when things don't go according to plan, or when you make an error. Know that you are not alone, that you are human, that you will make mistakes, but always begin from a place called Wonder, it is the only way that you will last the journey.

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