Ambiguous Encounters:
A Relational Approach to Phenomenological Research

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Abstract

This paper offers an account of how to engage one phenomenologically orientated version of relational research based on ideas from existential phenomenological philosophy as well as Gestalt theory, relational psychoanalysis, intersubjectivity theory and feminist methodology. Relational dynamics (both conscious and unconscious) between researcher and co-researcher are explored reflexively using illustrations from various phenomenological projects in which the author has been involved.

The relational approach to phenomenology described involves attending to four interlinked dimensions: open presence, embodied intersubjectivity, dialogic co-creation and entangled selves. The paper aims to show the importance of retaining an open, empathic, embodied presence to another's personhood while acknowledging the power of dialogue to bring to life new realities. Data is seen to emerge out of the researcher/co-researcher relationship and is mutually co-created in this encounter as each touches and impacts on the other. What we can learn and know about another arises within the intersubjective space between. In this zone of ambiguity and uncertainty, the unforeseen hovers and layered meanings invite discovery.

Introduction

An excerpt from a research interview:

- Linda [researcher]: … I'm seeing your travelling when you were younger in a different light now. It sounds like you were really running away from home.
- Pat [co-researcher]: Yeah.
- Linda: But you've made something of yourself and you feel proud(?).
- Pat: [nods] Now I'm putting them together.
- Linda: So it is like two sides of you coming together: your childhood side and your adult side are now coming into one, instead of being split. [after a pause] I'm feeling very emotional like I'm about to start crying.
- Pat: And I'm the same.
- Linda: [after a pause] Feels profound. I think I'm beginning to understand something of your mixed feelings.
- Pat: You definitely have! … When you were talking earlier I was puzzled and wondered *did I say it or did she? ...*

In relational approaches to phenomenological research, data is seen to emerge out of the researcher-

participant relationship and as being co-created (at least in part) in the embodied dialogical encounter. "There is a reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other," says Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968, p. 138). Relational phenomenologists believe that, when doing research, much of what we can learn and know about another arises within the intersubjective space between researcher and co-researcher. Each touches and impacts on the other, and that affects how the research unfolds. In this 'opening between' lurk ambiguity, uncertainty and unpredictability; anything can, and does, appear. As Pat notes, it can be hard to know where you end and the Other begins. _Did I say it or did she?_ "To the extent that I understand, I no longer know who is speaking and who is listening" (Merleau-Ponty, 1960/1964, p. 97).

In this paper, I offer an account of processes involved in my particular approach to relational phenomeno-logical research. This approach has been developed out of collaboration between Ken Evans and myself in outlining a broader relationally-orientated approach to qualitative research (Finlay & Evans, 2009). Drawing on relevant theory and examples from different empirical research projects in which I've been involved, four interlinked dimensions of our relational approach will be explored:

- Open presence
- Embodied intersubjectivity
- Dialogic co-creation
- Entangled selves

First, I lay out more generally what a relational approach means when applied to phenomenology.

Taking a Relational Approach to Phenomenology

The specific relational approach put forward in this paper has arisen out of collaboration between Ken Evans (a Gestalt and integrative psychotherapist) and myself (a phenomenological researcher) (Finlay & Evans, 2009)[1]. We argue that research data does not

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[1] Another way of working relationally is the co-operative inquiry approach of Heron (1996), stemming from the earlier New Paradigm Research (Reason & Rowan, 1981). This approach draws on some phenomenological ideas, but also casts its net further. Non-phenomenological methods of collaborative, participatory action research also embrace relational principles; examples include the work of Reason (1994) and Arvay (2003), as well as those arising from the large body of feminist social research (e.g. Fonow & Cook, 1991; Harding, 1987; Stanley & Wise, 1983).

'speak for itself' but is born within the _between_ of the researcher/co-researcher encounter where they intermingle in "pre-analytic participation" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, p. 203). Hycner (1991) explains this concept with specific reference to the therapy relationship (although these principles, we believe, can apply equally to research):

> If we take seriously the concept of _between_ there is a reality that is greater than the sum total of the experience of the therapist and client. _Together_ they form a totality that provides a context for the individual experience of both. (1991, pp. 134-135)

Ken Evans and I suggest that the researcher has a responsibility to build a bridge to the co-researcher, using his or her own special awareness, skills, experience and knowledge (Evans & Gilbert, 2005). But also central to our relational approach is the understanding that the research relationship involves an interactional encounter in which _both_ parties are actively involved. As we see it, research does not involve a participant subject talking/telling to a passive and distanced researcher who receives information. Instead, what is revealed emerges out of a constantly evolving, negotiated, dynamic, co-created relational process to which both researcher and participant co-researcher contribute (Evans & Gilbert, 2005). The process involves a "way of being with, without doing to" (Zinker & Nevis, 1994, p. 395) where the relationship is "continually established and re-established through ongoing mutual influence in which both [researcher and co-researcher] … systematically affect, and are affected by, each other" (Aron, 1983/1999, p. 248).

Analysis of research data focuses on exploring a person's embodied selfhood/self-identity and his or her lived relations with others. Particular attention is paid to exploring the individual's _being-in-the-world_, including his or her 'creative adjustments' (the defensive strategies the person has developed in order to cope). Analysis focuses equally on the emergent dynamics of the research relationship. The co-researcher's experience will also impact on the researcher consciously or unconsciously in embodied emotional ways, dreams and images.

In our approach, relational dynamics (both conscious and unconscious) between researcher and co-researchers are taken seriously and explored _reflexively_ (Finlay & Gough, 2003). This needs to be done without the researcher becoming excessively preoccupied with his or her _own_ experience of the

encounter (Finlay, 2002a; Finlay, 2002b). We value the use of reflexivity to keep communication channels open towards acknowledging emotional and relational dynamics, as well as any political tensions arising from the different social positions of researcher and co-researcher (be it in terms of power, gender, class, race, age, ethnicity, culture or any other factor). As Wolf notes, "The most central dilemma for contemporary feminists in fieldwork is power and the unequal hierarchies or levels of control that are often maintained, perpetuated, created and recreated during and after the field research" (Wolf, 1996, p. 2). In our research approach, we seek to deconstruct the researcher's authority (Finlay & Gough, 2003; Hertz, 1997) and, in the spirit of feminist methodology, use reflexivity to "mute the distance and alienation" which comes from objectifying those being studied (Wasserfall, 1997, p. 152).

Not every researcher, however, will be motivated to engage in the sustained reflexivity required, and not every research relationship and research project will demand it. Shifting into a relational approach would probably be an unnecessarily complicated elaboration for most qualitative research. For this reason, relational research should be applied selectively in accordance with what the research demands. For example, our relational research approach would be most appropriate for case study research conducted by psychotherapists who are already familiar with relational and reflexive approaches to their work. Alternatively, hermeneutic phenomenologists who are engaged in reflexively exploring a researcher's own experience in order to understand something of the fusion of horizons between subject and object (Gadamer, 1975/1996) may find that our relational approach offers a useful reflective tool. These phenomenologists may also value seeing how relevant theoretical concepts, such as empathy and intersubjectivity, arising from the therapy literature are specifically applied in actual practice.

Our relational approach, which we are continuing to develop, employs a range of theoretical concepts, straddling different traditions. Centrally, we draw on concepts from existential phenomenological philosophy that highlight consciousness as embodied intersubjective intentionality (e.g. Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962). Ideas arising from various theories from the therapy field[2] are also employed, including

Gestalt theory (e.g. Hycner & Jacobs, 1995), intersubjectivity theory (e.g. Stolorow & Atwood, 1992) and relational psychoanalysis (e.g. Mitchell & Aron, 1983/1999). Collaborative, creative and action orientated feminist methodology (e.g. Stanley & Wise, 1983; Fonow & Cook, 1991), which celebrates a focus on emotional dimensions and reflexivity as a source of insight, has additionally informed our emerging approach.

Finally, the work of the Jewish-German philosopher, theologian and educator Martin Buber has been a particularly significant influence. Buber (1923/1996) believed that students grow through the direct encounter with the person of the educator who, in turn, enters the phenomenological world of the student to experience and feel it. In this way we are challenged to grow through our relationships.

Writing of the more spiritual dimensions of human relationships, Buber talked poetically of the potential of the *I-Thou* relationship where each person is accepting of and open to the other. "I become through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become *I*, I say *Thou*. All real living is meeting" (Buber, 1937/1958, p. 11). The *I-Thou* relationship is one of mutual regard; it is free from judgement, narcissism, demand, possessiveness, objectification, greed or anticipation. Persons respond creatively in the moment to the other, eschewing instrumental and habitual ways of interacting (as found in the *I-It* relationship). The *I-Thou* relationship is mutually revealing. Recognising the value of the other's personhood helps one's own authenticity and personhood come into renewed being. Buber talks specifically of the value of dialogue in a relationship:

> Where the dialogue is fulfilled in its being, between partners who have turned to one another in truth, who express themselves without reserve and are free of the desire for semblance, there is brought into being a memorable common fruitfulness which is to be found nowhere else … . The world arises in a substantial way between men [*sic*] who have been seized in their depths and opened out by the dynamic of an elemental togetherness. The interhuman

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[2] There are similarities between all these approaches, although each has its specific take and emphasis. In contemporary Gestalt theory, the therapist commits to and trusts the 'process' of whatever appears figural at the moment of the embodied dialogical/experiential

encounter. With intersubjectivity theory, experiencing is seen to emerge out of interactions within the intersubjective field (past and present relationships). Relational psychoanalysts argue that learned patterns of interaction are inevitably enacted in the therapy situation, and so careful attention needs to be paid to what is happening in the therapy relationship.

opens out what otherwise remains unopened. (Buber, 1965, p. 86)

The ideas and theories discussed above provide both the underpinning foundations and the spirit of what we aim for in our relational approach to qualitative research. They also underpin the more specific version of a relationally orientated phenomenology I am putting forward in this paper.

Phenomenological researchers today can choose from a diversity of approaches. Just as there are many variants of phenomenological philosophy under the rubric of the broad movement (Moran, 2000), there are many ways in which it has been operationalised empirically in research[3]. The competing visions of how to do phenomenology stem from different philosophical values and theoretical preferences, as well as from varying methodological procedures. Different forms are demanded according to the type of phenomenon under investigation and the kind of knowledge the researcher seeks. Rather than being fixed in stone, the different phenomenological approaches are dynamic and undergoing constant development as the field of qualitative research as a whole evolves. "The flexibility of phenomenological research and the adaptability of its methods to ever widening arcs of inquiry is one of its greatest strengths" (Garza, 2007, p. 338).

All the variants of phenomenology share a similar focus on describing lived experience and recognising the significance of our embodied, intersubjective lifeworld. To a greater or lesser extent, they all investigate consciousness and the intentional relationship between persons and situations. As a result, the boundaries between these versions are often blurred in practice.

The same can be said about relational research approaches to phenomenology. In addition, relational approaches are discovery orientated and emphasise how data emerges out of co-created, embodied, dialogical encounters between researchers and co-researchers (participants). The researcher's attention slides between focusing on the co-researcher's talk/thoughts/feelings and exploring the relationship between researcher and co-researcher as it unfolds in a particular context.

One notable example of this way of working is the dialogal approach adopted by Halling and colleagues (Halling, 2008; Halling & Leifer, 1991; Halling, Leifer, & Rowe, 2006). Here, a group of phenomenologists investigate a phenomenon through dialogue which takes place both among researchers and between researchers and the phenomenon studied. Individuals share their experiences of the phenomenon, perhaps interview others, and then negotiate layered meanings collaboratively in the group until some consensus is reached.

Halling, Leifer, and Rowe (2006) describe this profoundly collaborative process in the context of their research into "forgiving another":

> Having identified themes in the individual stories, we began to compare the narratives to find common themes. Slowly a tentative structure of "forgiving another" became evident. We began writing and critiquing rough drafts of our interpretation, which were skeletal at first … . The process of writing and critiquing involved continually returning to the narratives and transcripts, the literature, and our own experience to refine, revise, expand, and flesh out our interpretation. The ongoing interaction between what we wrote and our dialogue with each other about our growing understanding of forgiving led to our final interpretation. (2006, p. 253)

This commitment to collaboration fits well with the relational approach I am developing with Ken Evans and now applying to phenomenology. However, while the collaboration may involve several researchers, our focus is on the collaboration with participants. Depending on the context, it may not be possible to collaborate as fully as Halling and his colleagues describe. However, the spirit of collaboration remains central, along with an attention to 'process'.

Ken Evans and I do not consider our approach to have predetermined linear steps (hence we view it as an

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[3] The emergence of phenomenological research in the 1970s was led by Giorgi, whose project was to develop a rigorous descriptive empirical phenomenology inspired by Husserlian ideas and geared towards studying 'essential structures' or 'essences of phenomena as they appear in consciousness' (Giorgi, 1985). Giorgi's work provided the impetus for what became known as the Duquesne approach or tradition (see, for example, Fischer, 1974, and Wertz, 1985). Different versions of phenomenological methodology have since evolved, including Ashworth (2003), Dahlberg, Dahlberg, & Nyström (2008), Halling, Leifer, & Rowe (2006), (Churchill-)Garza (2007), Moustakas (1990), Smith (2004), Todres (2007) and van Manen (1990).

approach and not a method). Instead, a number of interlinking dimensions are seen to fluidly permeate the research process as a whole. Four of these dimensions – *open presence, embodied inter-subjectivity, dialogic co-creation* and *entangled selves* – are discussed below.

Open Presence

We see the researcher's presence (his or her approach, attitude and responses) as being critical to the all-important research relationship. At the heart of having an open presence is the capacity to be emotionally and bodily present, earnestly listening to the other. Here the researcher is in contact with his or her own sensations, emotions, thoughts and fantasies while being open to, and staying with, the other in empathy. The researcher is ready to respond while also being prepared to cope with not-knowing, uncertainty and ambiguity (Evans & Gilbert, 2005). These ideas are underpinned by the work of therapists like Rogers (1951) and Kohut (1984). Both Rogers's emphasis on empathy, from the humanistic tradition, and Kohut's, from the self-psychology school, on empathic immersion, reinforce the foundational role played by the therapist's (and, I would add, the researcher's) ability to enter another's subjective world in attentive, empathetic ways while staying grounded in one's own embodied self. This is as much a relational process as it is about developing an intellectual conceptual understanding (Evans & Gilbert, 2005).

Underpinning this enabling empathetic presence is a particular phenomenological attitude of wonder and openness (Finlay, 2008). In this attitude, empathy is enacted alongside the epoché (Husserl, 1936/1970) whereby the researcher attempts to put aside his or her own understandings, to patiently hold open possibilities, in order to see the world afresh:

> The researcher strives to leave his or her own world behind and to enter fully … into the situations of the participants. The researcher empathically joins with participants ("co-performs" participants' involvements) in their lived situation(s). This sharing of the experience is the basis for later reflection on meanings and experiential processes. This attitude involves an extreme form of care that savours the situations described in a slow, meditative way and attends to, even magnifies, all the details. This attitude is free of value judgments from an external frame of reference and instead focuses on the meaning of the situation purely as it is given in the participant's experience. (Wertz, 2005, p. 172)

Dahlberg, Dahlberg, and Nyström (2008) further develop the idea of openness in their version of reflective lifeworld research. They call for the researcher to adopt an "open discovering way of being" and develop a "capacity to be surprised and sensitive to the unpredicted and unexpected" (2008, p. 98). In this version of openness, "vulnerable engagement" and "disinterested attentiveness" are simultaneously present.

> Openness is the mark of a true willingness to listen, see, and understand. It involves respect, and a certain humility toward the phenomenon, as well as sensitivity and flexibility. To be open means to conduct one's research on behalf of the phenomenon. This… shows how important it is … not to decide beforehand upon the methods by which the phenomenon should be studied. (2008, p. 98)

In practice, open presence can be hard for the researcher to maintain. One example of an occasion when I struggled with this occurred during an interview with a co-researcher (Ann) about her lived experience of multiple sclerosis (Finlay, 2003). I remember the specific moment during the interview when I caught myself thinking, "I've heard this story before", but then realized I hadn't. I understood then that I had, for a moment, stopped being properly present to Ann; I had stopped listening to her story as an individual one. It was Ann who prompted me to bracket what I later understood to be my scientific/medical pre-understandings and return to being open to her own lifeworld:

> *In my research on exploring the lived experience of early stage multiple sclerosis, I interviewed Ann. She talked powerfully of how her relations with others were under threat from her multiple sclerosis – specifically, from the loss of sensation in her hands. Poignantly, this impacted most on her relationships with her children.*
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> *Ann talked quite a bit about how the loss of sensation in her hands interfered with her daily functioning, but it took me a while to tune in. Initially, I fell into the trap of thinking about her experience and her loss*

of sensation in almost medical terms – I'd been looking at her body as an object. I even found myself thinking, "Well her disability is not that severe – it's only partial loss of sensation and she still has some motor function." Then she did something that yanked me into her life world ...

She described the sense of almost panic which hit her when she suddenly realised she may not ever again be able to reach out to feel the "softness of [her] baby's skin properly". She gently caressed her own cheek and then reached out to caress the child imagined in front of her. She described this as doing the "mummy thing".

Those fleeting, imaginary, subtle caresses disclosed a profound understanding. Suddenly, I understood that I needed to tune into her bodily experience – specifically her feeling of being unable to connect with – being unable to love - her children. Without sensation, she loses her ability to caress and hold and to express her love bodily to her children. Intimate relations are disrupted as her ability to embody her loving presence is thwarted. A dynamic relation between body-world is revealed when Ann reaches out to touch – and be touched by - her children but discovers she cannot feel them. (Finlay, 2006a, p. 23)

Although I had been trying to be open to Ann's story, I had been only partially successful. I fell into the trap of regarding Ann's neurological problems as being relatively mild (from a medical perspective). It took her subtle gesture to yank me back to her lived experience. Only then could I grasp what her symptoms meant to *her*: a major disruption disconnecting her from her world. I had to bracket my objectifying medical understandings of multiple sclerosis (Husserl's 1936/1970 *epoché* of the natural sciences) and simultaneously be open to her experience of being a therapist and a mother. I needed to be open to her *being* in a more holistic way.

Anne solicited a shift in my response which resulted in a deepening of my learning and understanding. "The presence of the other solicits a responsiveness and openness from the self … ," says Halling, drawing on Buber's ideas: "In so doing, it renders inaccessible, irrelevant, or at least significantly incomplete previously taken-for-granted or habitual ways of interacting with and perceiving this person" (Halling, 2008, p. 25). Halling goes on to note that one of the most profound aspects of becoming present to another is "how they, through their very existence, bring a world into being" (2008, p. 30). In this way, the relational approach involves recognising the profound and dynamic interaction which can occur between researcher and co-researcher – as will be discussed further in the next section.

Embodied Intersubjectivity

Linked to maintaining an open, empathic presence is the concept of embodied intersubjectivity. Our corporeal commonality and capacity for inter-subjectivity create the possibility of empathy and understanding of the other. Put in other words, it is our embodied "intersubjective horizon of experience that allows access to the experiences of others" (Wertz, 2005, p. 168).

Merleau-Ponty calls our attention to the way existences (beings) are intertwined in a dynamic of doubling and mirroring: "I discover in that other body a miraculous prolongation of my own intentions … . As the parts of my body together comprise one system, so my body and the other person's are one whole" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 354). In his later work, *The Visible and the Invisible,* he elaborates this idea by employing the radical metaphors of "chiasm" and "flesh". When he writes of "the intertwining of my life with the lives of others, of my body with the visible things, the intersection of my perceptual field with that of others" (1964/1968, p. 49), he emphasises the interpenetration of self-other, body-world. The flesh of the world and the individual as flesh are seen as enveloped in a reversible "double-belongingness".

In using such metaphors, Merleau-Ponty is calling our attention to the body which is in primordial relationship with others and the world. "The body is an intentional body, primordially relational, and co-arising with its situation that is not just fleshy perceptual but also full of implicit meanings and relational understandings" (Todres, 2007, p. 21).

In this intersubjective context, the challenge for the researcher is to recognise the co-researcher as a separate person in his or her own right while remaining in relationship with him or her. Buber's (1923) concept of *inclusion* is relevant here. This is the process where a person stays in his or her own

world of experience while empathising with the world of the other and holding a metaphysical meta-perspective on their joint relationship (Evans & Gilbert, 2005). In the words of Yontef (2002, p. 24), a Gestalt relational therapist, inclusion is the capacity to put "oneself into the experience of the patient as much as possible, feeling it as if in one's own body – without losing a separate sense of self".

An example of embodied intersubjective intertwining and inclusion in practice is research I undertook into the lived experience of receiving a cochlear implant (Finlay & Molano-Fisher, 2008). My co-researcher (Pat) had been profoundly deaf since she was 5 years old. When she was 55, she decided to have the implant. Her surgery resulted in her embarking on an emotional roller-coaster ride. Initially she felt catapulted into a surreal, alien world filled with hyper-noise. On good days, she was exhilarated by all her sensory gains and her feeling of being more connected with the world. On bad days, she was distracted and overwhelmed by the intrusive noise, and she was forcibly confronted with the painful reality of her own disability (past and present). The challenge she faced was not simply the cognitive-perceptual one of learning to discriminate between sounds. Pat found herself forced to re-orientate and renegotiate her whole *being-in-the-world* (Finlay & Molano-Fisher, 2008).

The aim of our research was to explore this new, ever-changing world as it presented itself to Pat. To collect data I went to stay with her one weekend. We also corresponded by e-mail over the course of several months. In this way, my understanding of Pat's experience evolved over the course of our deepening friendship.

The following extract from my reflexive diary describes a moment where I gained particular insight into her lived experience of learning to hear:

> *Together we went for a walk in the woods. It was an extraordinary experience. Step by step, I found myself tuning into her world. We started playing a game. I would draw her attention to a noise: the sound of a bird singing, her dog's paws rustling up the leaves, children laughing in the distance. It took a minute, but she would eventually discriminate and hear the sound. "Oh, that's what a xxx sounds like!" she'd say. Slowly, but surely, as she memorised each sound, a new world opened up for her.*

> *Pat proved to be a quick learner. Then she turned the tables on me. "What's that?" she'd ask. Sometimes I'd be able to answer. At other times, I had no idea. I was hearing new sounds myself! Slowly, I discovered my own perception changing just as Pat's was changing. Previously I would have thought that our walk in the woods would have been wonderfully peaceful and quiet. Now, I was seeing/ hearing the world differently. What a cacophony ... Yes, it is an incredibly noisy world! I was reminded of Abram's evocative phrase: "promiscuous creativity of the senses" (Abram, 1996, p. 58). Only now can I appreciate what he was saying.*

For this brief moment I felt as if I was experiencing the world through Pat's ears. I had laid aside my habitual perceptions and way of perceiving (without losing myself) and was able to empathise with, and then later explicate, something of Pat's own richly raucous lifeworldly experience. I empathically joined with Pat and – in relation – we explored the forest surrounding us both[4]. Referring to the intersubjective connection between people, their bodies and the world, Merleau-Ponty notes:

> It is in the world that we communicate … . It is from this lawn before me that I think I catch sight of the impact of the green on the vision of another, it is through the music that I enter into his musical emotion … . It is only through the world that I can leave myself. (1964/1968, p. 11)

We might also say that it is only through relating to others that we leave ourselves. As Halling (2008, p. 31) notes, "We cannot have genuine conversations with ourselves; instead, the call of relationship is precisely a call for us to move beyond ourselves." This point is developed further in the next section.

Dialogic Co-Creation

In the previous example, I suggested that I had imaginatively 'transposed' myself into Pat's body and, in doing so, had seemed to gain a fresh perspective on the world. However, none of us (researchers or co-researchers) have privileged access

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[4]   This intersubjective joining can equally be understood as 'co-performing' in Husserlian terms and 'being with' in Heideggerian terms.

to the 'reality' of our lived experience. How can I be sure that what I was experiencing was anything like what Pat was experiencing? It is for this reason that, as relational researchers, we continually strive to explore, reflexively and mutually, understandings that emerge through an evolving relationship. In relational research, we respond to what is 'in the field', check out our impressions, and try out various interpretations[5] to see what works at that moment. It is mostly through such active questioning/reflection and dialogue that understanding (however partial, emergent or tentative it may be) can be transformed. We invite co-researchers to tell their 'story', leaving it up to them to decide what aspects to focus on and to disclose. However, that choice is made in the dialogic context of the researcher's responses and inevitably constrained by wider social and structural forces.

"A genuine conversation gives me access to thoughts that I did not know myself capable of," says Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968, p. 13). This key idea underpins the concept of dialogic co-creation which celebrates dialogue, reciprocity, interaction and participation. In addition, in a co-creational view of relation, each partner constantly contributes to the evolving relationship, whether this is acknowledged or not (Evans & Gilbert, 2005). Dialogic co-creation recognises how people in relation impact on each other at many levels, both conscious and unconscious, in "reciprocal, mutual influence"[6] (Stolorow & Atwood, 1992, p. 18). *Did I say that or did she?*

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[5] The use of interpretation in phenomenology is contested. I am using the concept of interpretation loosely here, seeing description and interpretation as a continuum where specific work may be more or less interpretative. Van Manen (1990) suggests that, when description is mediated by expression (including non-verbal aspects, action, a work of art, or text), a stronger element of interpretation is involved. However, drawing on Gadamer's ideas, he distinguishes between interpretation as *pointing to* something (interpretation suited to phenomenological description) and interpretation as *pointing out* the meaning of something by imposing an external framework (such as when offering a psycho-analytic interpretation). Ricoeur has made a similar distinction between the "hermeneutics of meaning-recollection" (which he says aims for greater understanding of the thing to be analysed in its own terms, where meanings are brought out) and the "hermeneutics of suspicion", where deeper interpretations are needed to challenge surface accounts (Ricoeur, 1970).

[6] This mutuality is rarely symmetrical and does not imply equality or sameness. Mutuality is not an abrogation of the researcher's role and responsibility. Rather, it is an acknowledgement that two people can never be in relation without impacting each upon the other.

In phenomenological terms, as human subjects we constitute what we experience, in that our approach and perspective influences the nature of our experience. Our experience of another person is layered and shifts over time. In the context of two people in relationship to each other, the reciprocal co-constitution of what is experienced is amplified in powerful, unpredictable and ambiguous ways. Applied to a research situation, for example, a researcher might initially perceive a co-researcher as being arrogant, while the co-researcher, in turn, could view the researcher as an authority figure. However, through attentive listening and empathy, the researcher might enable the co-researcher to share his or her vulnerability**.** This might lead both parties to experience each other differently and to share more fully as trust builds. Both researcher and co-researcher, in this case, can be said to have co-constituted and mutually co-created their shifts in experience.

An illustration of dialogic co-creation can be found in a group phenomenological study (King et al., 2008) where six of us explored the phenomenon of "mistrust". I took on the role of conducting the in-depth interview with one participant, Kath. As a group, we then analysed the transcript of the interview, producing a layered analysis which contained both consensual and individual components. With this process, the dialogic co-creation occurred both during my interview with Kath and in subsequent discussion with my colleagues.

Kath had experienced being mistrusted by her colleagues and that had resulted in her feeling attacked by others and becoming more defensive. She described finding herself becoming a different person – a 'ghost' of herself, "a lesser me". In the following extract from my reflexive diary, I personally reflect on Kath's shifting sense of embodiment and show how – together – we came to understand what might have been happening in her experience of mistrust.

> I was struck by the way Kath seemed to have lost the embodied way-of-being she had previously relied upon. Having once been vivacious, bright, open, dynamic and humorous, she was describing the experience of 'pulling herself in' and becoming quiet and wary. Where once she had felt herself to be a 'big' person – in terms of both her presence and her personality – she was now made to feel 'reduced'. In the process of being forced to reduce, she had become a different person.

This is how she describes the process:

Kath: It was this kind of shift and change and the pulling in and the unsafeness of that environment which before had felt secure, [and which] clearly wasn't. I was shaky. Lots of the sort of firm things that you believed in were now shaky. Does that make sense?
Linda: Yes. So, when you say 'pulling in' – you pulled yourself into yourself?
Kath: Yes, I withdrew …
Linda: It seems like your very way of being is kind of quite open [mmm, mmm] and direct … . And here you've lost even your way of being.
Kath: … that really sums it up actually. I felt the person who left that college was not me. Or was a paler shade of me … . I had to kind of slow down in a sense, not in a speed sense but in a kinda closure sense ... in a protective sense.

As Kath was speaking, I was very aware of her 'big presence'. I had previously known Kath as a 'big personality' and as someone who physically embodied a big, attractive presence. Yet, in the course of our interview, she somehow started to 'fade' in front of my very eyes. I could feel a strange sensation within myself, a sense of closing down, closing in, shrinking, trying to become smaller, trying to become a 'paler' version of myself. *Slowly I was disappearing. Then I realised that, strangely enough, this new reality actually felt safer. If I couldn't be seen, I wouldn't be hurt .…* I dwelt there some more … . I could understand and accept Kath's need to 'reduce' and close down. At the same time, I began to feel something else. *Losing myself also felt slightly scary. Who would I be and who would I become if I was to disappear to be replaced by a paler-shaded me? I became aware that I felt somehow sad at the loss of my customary embodied way of being.* I looked at Kath and she, too, seemed to me to be sad and a little lost – indeed, vulnerable in her loss.

As I was listening to Kath, it seemed that what I was feeling was, in some sense, mirroring something in her. I rode with this idea. If this was the case, one way into understanding Kath's experience was to try to understand what was happening within me – or, more specifically, within and to *my* body. With this in mind, during the interview, **I shared with Kath what was happening to me** [my emphasis]. I was aware that this could have had the unfortunate result of re-directing the focus from Kath to me. However, as it happened, I don't feel that what occurred detracted from Kath's experience. Instead, I believe that my attempt to empathise seemed to help her better articulate the pain of being a big woman forced to 'reduce'. (King et al., 2008, pp. 95-96)

As this excerpt shows, Kath was impacting on me emotionally, bodily and empathically; but, at the same time, I was impacting on her. Kath's disclosures of her pain and her acceptance of my interpretations arose out of what was happening in the moment and through our dialogue. *Did I say it or did she?*

In the experience of dialogue, there is constituted between the other person and myself a common ground; my thought and his are inter-woven into a single fabric, my words and those of my interlocutor are called forth by the state of the discussion, and they are inserted into a shared operation of which neither of us is the creator. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 354)

This illustration shows the way I checked out my bodily perceptions with Kath *in dialogue.* Her response of "that sums it up" suggested that it was possible that I had mirrored something of her experience. However, rather than seeing this as a validation process which confirms 'truths', I would argue that it is about engaging dialogue towards deepening relative meanings. Todres (2007) makes a similar point while explaining his embodied enquiry approach: "I can check out to some degree the extent of our interembodied understanding by sharing some implications of my embodied understanding". The challenge is to consider the extent to which this should happen and to question what degree of concordance is sufficient (Todres, 2007, p. 39).

It is worth acknowledging that another interviewer might well have reached a different place from the one Kath and I attained. This point was suggested by other group members who had analysed the Kath-Linda transcript. Their perceptions gave us the opportunity to discuss alternative understandings.

This further layer of dialogue allowed us to probe and deepen our individual and group understandings. For example, two members thought that, through my form of questioning, I might have fostered an explicit concern with emotionality and engaged a dialogue akin to that found in a therapeutic relationship. This was not unlikely, given that I am a therapist and that Kath knew emotionality to be a habitual focus of mine. My colleagues argued that Kath's narrative initially had a neutral and factual tone, but quickly (through my therapeutic reflecting back) took on the tone of a brave and battling victim. As they put it, "We can only suggest this alternative reading here. However, it does show how important it is to be aware of the way in which interviews are the product of joint action" (King et al., 2008, p. 94). Their observations highlight not only the co-creation process, but also the multiple understandings that surround this process. They are further testimony to the impossibility of reaching a single 'correct' interpretation.

My understanding of Kath as an Other was mirrored by Kath: she in turn empathised; she responded to me (from her own vantage point) as an Other. Together – in dynamic dialogue and in a particular context – we created our research 'reality': one which, like the lived world, is always open to more than one reading.

Entangled Selves

The concept of entangled selves suggests 'multiple selves' in relation. This follows Bruner's idea that the 'self' is best understood not as a pure and enduring core, but rather as multifaceted, contextual and relativised: the "sum and swarm of participations in social life" (Bruner, 1990, p. 107). The world of the person, in terms of his or her social relationships, is internalised; the fragmented external world is mirrored internally. People's identities or subjectivities are distributed beyond the boundaries of their physical body to merge with the relational and social world. People's selves and consciousness are social through and through (Wetherell & Maybin, 1996). "There is no inner man [sic]," Merleau-Ponty famously explains: "man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself" (1945/1962, p. xi).

The last example in the previous section – the Kath-Linda encounter – highlights some of the complex dynamics and multiple selves which can occur when researcher and co-researcher meet. First, the power dimension needs to be acknowledged, where the fact that I was a researcher, and as such asking Kath to disclose her vulnerabilities which I was going to go off to analyse, cannot be ignored. My discomfort with this lack of mutuality may have nudged me into my therapist mode, which possibly felt a more nurturing place. In any case, I was present to the Kath-Linda relationship in more than a straightforward research capacity. It seems that I may have introduced into the mix something from my own history as a 'caring therapist'. This, in turn, may have triggered something in Kath, encouraging her to edge towards the stance of 'victim'. However, this process is probably even more complicated. While I had several roles which I was inevitably juggling (chief among them, in this instance, the roles of therapist and researcher), questions can also be raised about my habitual interactional roles and pattern of operating. All manner of unconscious entanglements seem to be implicated here. If I reflexively probe my motivations, I understand that I have an emotional need to give care to others, perhaps as a result of significant gaps in the care I received as a child. I know that I tend to thrive on the empathy I once longed to receive; my providing of care can be seen as an effective way to deny my own need to be cared for. My child self can be seen as entwined with my adult therapist and researcher selves. If this can be said of me, what selves were activated in Kath during the course of our encounter?

Relational researchers assume that both researcher and co-researcher "bring to the encounter the sum total of who they are in all their complexity and with their own individual histories and ways of organising their experience [and] their unconscious processes". Both are then "faced with the challenge of meeting the other in all his/her complexity" (Evans & Gilbert, 2005, pp. 74-75). The co-researcher's life experiences and ways of interacting with another will impact both consciously and unconsciously on the researcher, and vice versa. Drawing attention to the unconsciously co-created which allows a therapist insight into a client's process, Ogden (1994) speaks of the unconscious intersubjective 'analytic third' which emerges in the interplay between subjectivity and intersubjectivity. It is as if a third presence is in the room. This process could similarly arise in the research context.

One way of understanding these complicated entanglements where we respond at multiple levels to each other is to acknowledge that we are creatures of family, social and cultural contexts, and as such are continually being formed by our interactions with others (from both our present and our past). Researchers may produce knowledge, but it is a joint production and one that arises relationally and within

a particular discursive context and culture. As Gergen (1999, p. 64) puts it, "the moment we begin to speak we are already 'spoken' by a pre-existing structure".

In any one encounter, multiple subjectivities are present. The 'here and now' contains something of the 'there and then', where the selves of one person elicit those of another. As the selves set each other off, they trigger responses that are habitual to the persons involved. These are the kinds of ideas expressed (in various guises) in symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934)[7], as well as in relational psychoanalysis, Gestalt theory, intersubjectivity theory, social constructionism and feminist theory.

De Young (2003) describes these relational entanglements as 'thickly populated' encounters. She calls our attention to the need to take a wider relational perspective and go beyond or behind what is being spoken. She illustrates the point well with a therapy example:

> So when a client tells you a story as if there were no other people in it – last night he was desperately trying to finish a project without falling into his private pitfalls of perfectionism and procrastination – you know how thickly populated that scene really is. You know that just out of his awareness, there's how hard it is to please his father, and how his mother is on another planet, no help at all, and how his older sister can do whatever she sets her mind to. You keep the relational story in mind. It's as true for him today as it was 20 years ago, though different actors (a boss, a wife, a colleague) may be playing the main characters.

> You know that public school taught all the kids of his generation that grades mattered more than the pleasure of exploration, and that, as a middle-class North American, he believes that individual accomplishment is the mark of a successful life. But, as far as

he knows, working hard to finish his project, this is just his internal, individual struggle to dodge inevitable failure. As a relational therapist, you swim against this stream of "isolated self". (2003, p. 2)

Paralleling these ideas at a philosophical level, Heidegger (1927/1962), Ricoeur (1981) and other hermeneutic philosophers argue strongly for people's embeddedness in the world of language, ideas and social relationships. Heidegger, for instance, examines the ineluctable "thrownness" and historicity of *Dasein*. For these thinkers, culture and our collective identities permeate, animate and imbue our lifeworld in subtly pervasive and indeterminate ways which can be both seen and not-seen. As Adams puts it, "All self-boundaries are symbolic and practical social constructions, existing only by cultural convention and personal preference" (Adams, 1999, p. 59). Existential features of identity, discourse and temporal/spatial aspects of the lifeworld are all implicated.[8] Husserl expresses the idea thus:

> We stand within the horizon of human civilization, the one in which we ourselves now live. We are constantly, vitally conscious of this horizon, and specifically as a temporal horizon implied in our given present horizon. To the one human civilization there corresponds essentially the one cultural world as the surrounding lifeworld with its [peculiar] manner of being. (Husserl, 1936/1970, p. 369)

The complex interplay of personal and cultural influences is well captured by Levin:

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[7] Mead grounds his analysis of human consciousness in social processes of communication and interaction, making the Other a critical part of self-understanding. The world in which the self lives is seen as both an inter-subjective and an interactive world; it is a "populated world". Intersubjectivity emerges as a "meeting of minds" occurring in conversation, learning, reading and reflecting. It is through these socio-symbolic interactions between individuals that the mind, consciousness and the self come into existence.

[8] Drawn on here are Ashworth's (2003, 2006) "fractions" of the lifeworld:
- selfhood (meanings of identity, agency, presence, voice)
- relationships with other people and what others mean to the person (sociality)
- embodiment (meanings related to one's own sense of one's body)
- temporality (meanings about past, present and future)
- spatiality (sense of place, space and bodily scope and possibilities)
- project (the central concern for the person which reveals itself in the situation)
- discourse (socially available ways of talking or acting that the person is drawing upon)
- mood-as-atmosphere (the feeling tone of the situation).

As soon as we begin to move and gesture in response to the presence of the human Other, we are held by our culture in the corresponding beholdenness of our bodies. In every human voice, there are echoes of the mother's tongue, echoes of significant teachers, respected elders, close friends; and there are accents, too, which bind the voice to the history of a region, a culture, and generations of ancestors. (Levin, 1985, p. 174)

In relational research terms, we could say that we bring a host of past relational and social selves into any one encounter. Our task as relational researchers is to employ reflexivity both to recognise the impact that our various intrapersonal, relational, social and cultural attachments may be having on the co-researcher, and to explore the ways in which our own horizons of experience and understanding may be touching those of the other. While our shared horizons may allow for an initial communication, it is through the confrontation with the other's otherness that our own assumptions and prejudices are thrown into relief and we gain new understandings (Gadamer, 1975/1996).

The complicated nature of entangled selves at both micro- and macro-levels was revealed during some collaborative research I engaged in with Ken Evans (Evans & Finlay, 2009) on the proposed statutory regulation of the psychotherapy field in the United Kingdom. In view of the profound impact impending state registration was expected to have on the profession, we sought to explore the views, thoughts, expectations, hopes and fears of ten psychotherapists drawn from person-centred, Gestalt and integrative approaches. We adopted a collaborative relational-phenomenological approach using a focus group to collect data.

In recognition of Ken Evans's extensive knowledge of the research topic, we decided early on that, in the focus group, he should act as a talker as well as a researcher. For my part, I would be an observer while at the same time acting as his mentor/research supervisor. We felt that supervision would be the key forum where we could begin to untangle the complicated entwining of our different issues as part of the analysis process (Gilbert & Evans, 2000).

As we analyzed the focus group material together, both phenomenologically and reflexively, we found that *shame* processes seemed to feature strongly in all four of our emergent themes: feeling pride/feeling shame, belonging/isolation, credibility/ineligibility and fight/flight. We found that, while formal regulation for psychotherapists in the UK seemed to offer enhanced status and esteem and a greater sense of belonging, our co-researchers were also apprehensive about problems ahead. In our analysis, we suggested that unconscious 'parallel processes' might be playing out in both the intrapersonal and wider professional (i.e. cultural) arena.

In the following extract, we provide an account of one such instance of possible parallel processes. When Ken Evans (in his role as my co-collaborator in the research) initially approached our focus group members, he was oddly self-effacing and reticent, even suggesting that we squeeze the group into a "quick lunch hour". It was only when he received a challenge from the group members about why he was marginalising the research that we began to see connections with the sense of shame he was experiencing. This seemed to stem from his having felt relatively marginalised as a professional over a period of years.

In a joint paper (Evans & Finlay, 2009) we mull over this discovery:

> We were surprised at the power of unconscious processes which were unexpectedly revealed during data collection. Of particular note is how the shame experiences were shown to parallel the wider field. One example of this was when Ken had initially suggested, rather apologetically, that the focus group convene in the lunch hour, so as to limit any disruption of the personal and professional development remit of the group. All other participants expressed their preference to include the focus group exploration in the scheduled work time. Subsequently, while sharing two historical experiences of feeling marginalised, Ken expressed shock, amazement and anger as he realised that he had internalised the oppression of these historical experiences. He had been trapped within a parallel process whereby he mirrored his own sense of marginalisation by unwittingly marginalising the focus group by suggesting that it be subsumed within a lunch break, outside the main agenda! This was a clear and dramatic example of the influence of unconscious forces on the research endeavour.

In this research example, the professional-political context is both in the foreground and the crucial background to the group members' meanings around the issue of statutory regulation. While the topic was initially presented in terms of personal meanings (we had assumed different people would view it in different ways), it quickly became clear that there was some commonality, that certain meanings were shared. The research question "What is the meaning to you of being registered?" was soon turned into "What is the meaning of *not* being registered?" This re-framing reflected the reality of our group of person-centred, Gestalt and integrative psycho-therapists who have felt side-lined by more dominant modalities. Powerful mixed responses were triggered: feelings of pride and professional esteem jostled with feelings of shame. Given the current climate of change, it is not surprising that shame responses have been activated by questions of professional identity (Evans & Finlay, 2009)**.**

In the process of analysing the data, Ken Evans and I recognised that his 'therapist', 'researcher' and 'co-researcher' selves were entangled both with selves from earlier parts of his life and with his more current 'political activist' self, actively involved in the issue of professional accreditation.

Our findings reaffirmed our view of the importance of reflexively processing the influences on research data. We would argue that, as supervision offers an important arena to examine this process, supervision of researchers' unconscious experiences should be an ethical requirement of relational research beyond what is conventionally considered sufficient (Finlay & Evans, 2009; Gilbert & Evans, 2000).

Conclusion

This paper has offered an account of how to engage one version of phenomenological relational research by attending to four interlinked dimensions: *open presence*, *embodied intersubjectivity*, *dialogic co-creation* and *entangled selves*. Arguing that data is co-created within and through the research context, I have tried to show both how this data emerges out of the researcher/co-researcher relationship, and that dialogue has the power to bring new realities into being. Throughout I have highlighted the value of retaining an open, empathic, embodied presence to another's personhood, given the position that what we can learn and know about another arises within the intersubjective space *between.* This opening is a zone of ambiguity and uncertainty where the unforeseen hovers and layered meanings invite discovery. There is "buoyancy in understanding that leads the conversational partners beyond their original horizons into a process of inquiry that has a life of its own and is often filled with developments that are unanticipated and unintended" (Linge, 1976, p. xxii).

Given the complexity of the 'space between' researcher and co-researcher, where entanglements feature at different levels and where past selves surface to interact with those of the present, a radical research approach is called for. Such an approach demands that we attend reflexively to the context of the moment in all its dimensions – interpersonal, historical and cultural. At the same time, there is a need to focus selectively on the particular factors (unconscious, relational or social) that seem to be particularly figural at any one time.

Relational research is not for every researcher, and nor is it appropriate for every topic. Not every researcher will be motivated to engage in the sustained reflexivity required. Not every researcher will have the experience, knowledge and skills to tap into unconscious and/or relational processes. Not every research relationship offers rich layers to be probed, and not every research project requires relational attention. Indeed, it could be argued that, for most qualitative research (and phenomenology in particular), it would be an unnecessary elaboration to shift towards a relational approach. Researchers also need to be aware of pitfalls such as falling prey to navel gazing: that is, excessive preoccupation with their own emotions and experience. Without critical monitoring (and supervision), intersubjective reflection is likely to be of limited value and open to the charge of self-indulgence (Finlay, 2002a, 2002b).

Used selectively and judiciously, however, relational research has much to offer. "To be a person is to live in the world with others," says Halling (2008, p. 216). "Anytime we become truly present to this reality, we are both enriched and humbled." I agree. Relational research can open up new worlds, can unlock revelatory moments of embodied intersubjective intertwining when we are surprised, touched and awed by the Other; when our curiosity is whetted and our understandings challenged. Caught in the wonder of such transformational moments, we have much to celebrate – and to puzzle over. *Did I say that or did she? ...*

About the Author

Practising as a freelance academic consultant, Dr Linda Finlay teaches psychology and writes with the Open University (Milton Keynes, UK). She also offers teaching and mentorship on the use of qualitative methodology. Dr Finlay is a qualified occupational therapist and an academic psychologist best known for her textbooks on occupational therapy in mental health and her work on reflexivity in qualitative research.

Dr Finlay's research interests include the application of existential phenomenological, hermeneutic and relational approaches to exploring the lived experience of disability. She is currently researching the lived-experience of discovering a kindred spirit connection. Her most recent book, *Relational-Centred Research for Psychotherapists* (co-authored with Ken Evans), was published in 2009.

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