When Intimacy and Companionship are at the Core of the Phenomenological Research Process

by **Steen Halling**

Historically, there has been an ambivalent attitude in psychology toward the place of the "subjective" both in clinical practice and in research. This has been true even for phenomenological research where there is a desire to embrace the personal while there is also a concern that findings be presented as if they are objective in the sense of having an existence independent of the particular researcher's relationship to them. This article discusses a collaborative approach to research that depends on the development of a relationship of intimacy among the researchers and between the researchers and the phenomenon under study. The dialogal phenomenological approach has a twenty-year history and has been used to study phenomena such as social activism, helping and healing, forgiveness, and hopelessness. Focusing especially on two recent studies of hopelessness, I discuss how in the context of dialogue among researchers presence and intimacy, and truth and understanding become possible, and how working collaboratively makes it easier to find words to speak to what one encounters.

Introduction

Research, even in the human sciences, is typically thought of as a highly specialized area of practice with its own esoteric vocabulary and carefully defined concepts. For this reason, I want to emphasize, at the outset, that while I am discussing research, and a particular approach to research that my colleagues and I call dialogal phenomenological research, the basic dimensions of the research process that come up in this context are not technical in nature but fundamental to human life. "Dialogue" is not something that we invented, obviously, any more than we invented intimacy or companionship. By dialogue I mean a focused conversation, whether with one other person or with a small group, whether at work or at home, that leads to a deeper personal understanding or appreciation of an important aspect of our lives. These experiences

of dialogue are both rare and memorable. The hermeneutical philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer has eloquently described the quality of such conversations. He writes, "We say that we 'conduct' a conversation, but the more fundamental a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner." This shows," he adds, "that a conversation has a spirit of its own and that the language used in it bears its own truth within it" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 345). On these occasions we are witness to our capacity for openness and transcendence. That is, upon reflection, we realize that we arrived at a new understanding by giving our full attention to something that really mattered to us and to our partners in conversation and through our willingness to be "carried away."

Setting the Stage

I want to explore the place intimacy has in the collaborative research endeavour rather than as a topic of research. However, regardless of how one approaches intimacy it is a difficult topic to write about or discuss, especially if you want to do justice to it rather than explaining it away or reducing it to a shadow of its original self. I am using the word intimacy with its meaning of close associations with others as well as closeness of observation and knowledge of a topic. Ironically, most psychological methods are ill-suited for bringing experiences to life so that we might have closer contact with them. This is in contrast to the arts, where, as George Steiner (1991) has written, "There is a shining through" and a creation of a presence that engages us" (p. 36). The dialogal approach to research that my colleague Jan Rowe and I stumbled upon some years ago has at its core the emergence, if not the creation, of presence. At the time, we had set out with four graduate students to study the topic of forgiveness (Rowe et al., 1989). By presence I mean a place of meeting, where the researchers are (at least part of the time) fully attentive and available to each other (Buckley, 1971), and where the phenomenon being studied is also vividly present as the researchers are engaged with stories that describe it. My focus will be less on the particular topics that we have studied along the way than on the depth and intimacy that this research process brings into existence and the critical role of reflection within this process. A brief story will help set the stage for this exploration.

A little over a year ago I gave a brief paper on this topic of intimacy and research at a conference where there were just twenty minutes allotted for each presentation and an additional ten minutes for discussion. After my talk I felt disheartened both by my own limitations in communicating what I wanted to say and by the lack of possibility for extended dialogue.

Consoling myself with the cliché that one can learn more from failure than from success, I spent some time reflecting on what had occurred.

As it happened, this conference was held in a town near the mountains in Alberta, Canada. There were deer wandering around on the grounds of the conference centre, searching for food and apparently unafraid of people. But, as I discovered when I tried to take pictures of them, they would run off if you got closer than twenty or thirty feet. It seems to me intimacy has something in common with these deer since it is an elusive phenomenon that appears only under specific conditions, such as a context of relative safety. And yet, when you are right in the centre of intimacy, when you are truly present to the situation and to others, there is also something quite robust about it.

Each of us has our own particular ways of finding the way back to our basic values and to the sources of inspiration that animate our lives - a special place, a letter, a poem, an article or a book may be a vehicle for such a return as well as a symbol of what is important to us. During my ruminations, my thoughts turned to the American novelist Edward Lewis Wallant who had a remarkable talent for leading his readers into the depth of what it means to be human. Twenty years ago I gave a presentation entitled "The Birth of a Life of Feeling: Lessons from a Novelist," in which I described him as a writer who was able to touch our hearts and minds in ways that are both disturbing and uplifting. This was certainly the effect that his four novels had on me. His best-known book, *The Pawnbroker* (Wallant, 1961), was the first American work of fiction that dealt with the holocaust.

Wallant had a remarkable understanding of what it is that enables people to open up to the world and to their own inner life and what that process looks like. To use psychological jargon, he knew what is involved in personality change. Moreover, he had a gift for pulling his readers

into the lives of his characters. Wallant keeps his readers off guard because he presents his characters, and especially his protagonists, as not quite like the rest of us - they are more comical, inept, confused and emotionally constricted than we are. But they suffer from the ills of our age - from despair, emptiness, estrangement, and the excesses of science and technology, and as he shows how his characters change we become involved in their lives because their troubles and foibles resonate so much with our own. When they move toward an awakening or rebirth in the midst of their pain and anguish we are alongside them; we become involved with their intimate moments.

In an article published a year after his death, Wallant wrote:

> Normally we see others only as they relate to our own immediate needs, and for that normal vision is often sufficient. Yet there are times when we have a need we cannot recognize, a sudden hunger to know what lies in the heart of others. It is then that we turn to the artist, because only he can reveal even the little corners of the things beyond bread alone   (Galloway, 1979, p. 155).

I agree with Wallant that we have a hunger to know what lies in the hearts of others, as well as a desire to connect more deeply with ourselves, with nature, and with the existence in which we are all participants. Fortunately, there are a number of ways to move towards depth, including meditation and psychotherapy, and what Buber calls I-thou relationships. We may not be as eloquent or skilled as the novelist or artist in portraying, in words or images, what this depth entails. At times, it may not even be so important to express in words what we experience. However, in qualitative research, the domain that I am addressing, giving words to experience is critical. Here, under the best of circumstances, writing (or speaking) and

experience have a reciprocal relationship insofar as speaking not only allows for a sharing of experiences, but also leads to a renewed and deeper appreciation of the experiences that we have had.

Yet being faithful to experience, the guiding principle of phenomenology - the tradition that has guided my colleagues and myself - is not so easy. Gemma Corradi Fiumara, an Italian psychoanalyst and philosopher, has recently published a book on the relationship between feeling and thinking. In writing of the limitations of language, she says "We have an immense terminology for discrete details of observable reality, and a comparatively scarce vocabulary for what is essential to mental life." She adds: "We find it so difficult to cope with our unfathomable depth all by ourselves that we constantly seek allies and support for our own psychic survival" (Fiumara, 2001, pp. 94-95). This is what I want to discuss: the value of companionship in doing research and exploring topics in depth and how working collaboratively makes it easier to find the words to speak to what one discovers.

Dialogal Research

There has been a growing emphasis on qualitative research within the social sciences in the last twenty-five years or so. Once one moves into qualitative research a whole new world opens up, and researchers enter into a different relationship to the topics they study. As Daniel Sciarra (1991) points out, the "qualitative researcher must constantly negotiate issues of closeness and intimacy because they are the necessary consequences of the serious qualitative endeavour" (p. 44). However, historically even qualitative researchers have been ambivalent about relying on personal experience of a phenomenon and the notion of intimacy in research is controversial. I do not dispute that there are legitimate concerns about the extent to which researchers' personal and cultural

backgrounds and agendas may prevent them from coming to a meaningful and valid understanding of a topic. However, the consequence of these concerns is that while there is a desire to acknowledge and include the subjective, there is also an attitude of suspicion toward it. The notion of "intimacy" in research raises even more questions and concerns. It may bring to mind the spectre of loss of professionalism and even lapses into illicit conduct!

So let me offer some reflections on the place of intimacy in research and the rewards and challenges associated with it. These reflections are based on almost twenty years of experience in navigating these exciting and sometimes tumultuous waters. My colleague Jan Rowe and I have participated in small collaborative groups engaged in the dialogal approach to qualitative research, and I have also helped graduate students use this approach with class projects. Let me briefly describe the context for these research projects. Jan and I teach in a Master's degree program in therapeutic psychology at Seattle University, USA. Our program has an existential and phenomenological orientation and also draws upon the contributions of the humanities and contemporary psychoanalytic perspectives such as self- psychology, object relations, and the intersubjective theory of George Atwood and Robert Stolorow. Although our primary purpose is to provide our students with a solid foundation for therapeutic practice, we have also developed a tradition of involving students in qualitative research projects.

Since 1985 we have initiated small group research projects on topics such as social activism, and forgiveness and hopelessness, using our dialogal phenomenological method. In reality, it is not so much a method, in the sense that one follows predefined steps and procedures, as it is a process of discovery that takes place when a group of researchers sets out to study a phenomenon in a profoundly collaborative way. This approach is characterized most generally by

open and ongoing conversation on two levels: dialogue thus both among the researchers and between the researchers and the phenomenon. This dialogal method differs significantly from other phenomenological and qualitative methods in its process, although not in its aim. Faithfulness to the phenomenon is fostered through open dialogue among the researchers in relationship to the data - in the form of descriptions or interviews - and through careful consideration of multiple perspectives. Dialogue is the basis for every step of the research: making decisions about process, sharing tasks, and interpreting data (Halling, Kunz, & Rowe, 1994; Halling & Leifer, 1991; Rowe *et al*., 1989;). We rely on descriptions from "subjects," as well as our own, thus giving us another source of data that is "felt."

For example, as we researched the experience of despair, the six of us (two faculty and four graduate students) wrote and reflected on our own descriptions of despair early in the process (Beck *et al*., 2003). Through this exploration, however difficult and unsettling it was, we came to a deeper appreciation of our fellow researchers. These descriptions varied considerably in style and content and revealed much about the differences in our personalities and life circumstances. As we continued to learn more about each other over next the two years, we found ways to be supportive of each other. This was especially important given the nature of our topic. We also started to identify some of our assumptions about the phenomenon we were studying and thereby prepared ourselves for the process of doing in-depth interviews with our research participants. In the disciplined context of group collaboration, this inclusion of the researchers' own experience often leads to an intimate and more focused relationship with the phenomenon, and among the researchers, and allows for the generation of a nuanced and rich understanding of the topic being investigated. Of course, readers can evaluate for themselves whether this claim is justified by looking at our

publications (e.g., Bauer, *et al*., 1992; Beck, *et al.*., 2003; Beck, *et al.*., 2005; Rowe, *et al*., 1989).

This approach has multiple strengths, at least in the case of those groups where the researchers work effectively together. It is especially striking how the phenomenon becomes vividly present in the group. Through the process described above, the researchers enter into an intimate relationship with what they are studying - it is not a topic "out there," but a reality that is in the room. By going back to descriptions (those of the people we interviewed and our own), we kept our work empirical. Within the context of cooperation and careful listening to self and others that characterize dialogue, it becomes possible to make the most of the various perspectives within the group. One does not have to rely upon oneself alone to recognize one's own prejudgments, to overcome seemingly intractable obstacles to defining the phenomenon being studied, or to arrive at an interpretation that resonates with the richness of the accounts that have been collected. Moreover, one researcher's comments or observations may spark a new thought in the mind of another, thus providing the impetus for a conversation that leads to a fresh perspective on an issue.

Of course, given that the approach is not based on preconceived steps but emerges out of the dialogue among the researchers there is considerable uncertainty at various points through the research process. This makes for a daunting situation, especially for those who are new to the process. Admittedly, Jan Rowe and I gave a certain amount of direction to these groups, especially at the outset, and subsequent to the initial project (Rowe, *et al*., 1989); we could look to the previous study or studies for guidance. Nonetheless, since the essence of the approach is that the members of the group decide together how best to address the particular topic under investigation, there is no standard script to follow. One of the challenges, then, is for the group to tolerate uncertainty; at the same time the open-ended nature of the endeavour also provides great opportunities for creativity and discovery. I have been struck by how closely linked creativity, imagination and playfulness are to dialogue. This has been true of many of the student groups that I have observed as well as the groups in which I have participated. It is extraordinary what can happen when the members of the group have a clear focus and when they trust each other. This was evident in our study of how psychotherapists navigate despair (Beck *et al*., 2005). One of the group members, Jen Schulz, who teaches creative writing, proposed that in addition to interviewing experienced psychotherapists, the four student researchers invite other second year students, who were also therapists-in-training, to participate in a creative writing workshop that would focus on their experience of despair as they sat with clients. The workshop was intended to elicit descriptions in a non-threatening manner. The stories that emerged from this workshop were remarkably candid and evocative (Beck *et al*., 2005; Schulz, 2002), and the format was one that would not have normally ever occurred to Jan or myself.

As one would expect, participating in one of these research projects leaves a deep impression on the researchers. For example, one of the members of the group that studied "forgiving another," forgave someone who had deeply injured her by the time the study had been completed. That the process can so readily affect the researchers raises the issue of risk because this is an experiential adventure, and adventures take us into the unknown. For this process to work, the researchers have to be open and therefore vulnerable to each other. In principle, all of us endorse the idea of openness, but when it comes to the practice of openness, things get a lot murkier (Dahlberg & Halling, 2001). There is clearly vulnerability in sharing one's thoughts, let alone descriptions of personal experience, with other members of the group.

There is also a risk involved in being open to the topic that one is studying. As mentioned above, our most recent research group studied psychotherapists' experience of, and response to, despair as it was present for them during their sessions with clients. We had been reading the transcripts of our interviews with these therapists, and all of them described in some detail their work with patients who were seriously disturbed and several of whom had a history of childhood abuse. One of our group members said that she had nightmares after reading one such transcript, again reminding us of how affecting research can be, and opening the door to a discussion of how each of us was dealing with this material. But, of course, this is part of how we know a phenomenon - through its effect on us. Time and time again, in various projects, we had found that our own responses, individually and collectively, are revealing of the phenomena we are studying. It is akin to the psychoanalytic notion of countertransference, understood very broadly, where one acknowledges that one's responses and reactions are reflective not just of oneself as an individual but of one's relationship with and experience of the other person in the room, the patient. The difference is that topics such as forgiveness and hopelessness are phenomena that belong to all of us, and in that sense they are known to us as persons before we study them as researchers.

The vivid way in which the phenomenon under study becomes present in the groups and therefore shapes the way the researchers collaborate creates its own challenges. It was more difficult to stay focused on our topic in the despair than in the forgiveness research group. There were certainly times during the early phase of our first despair study when we seriously questioned the feasibility of our project. At those times, the student members of the group still had their doubts about the viability of the method. But more fundamentally, I think, we had not yet realized how much our turmoil was a sign of our involvement with the topic rather than of failure,

just as shortness of breath may be an indicator that one is getting closer to the peak of the mountain.

It is a little easier to see some of these patterns as an observer. Each winter I teach a graduate class where groups of students work on topics such as healing or transference in psychotherapy. Typically, there is considerable tension in the group working on transference whereas the group focusing on healing proceeds more comfortably, sometimes too much so. In studying transference, the student researchers' own unresolved and unacknowledged conflicts make it difficult to develop a comfortable relationship with either colleagues or the topic being studied and, at least at times, the personal may overwhelm the professional. I imagine this would be just as true for a group of faculty or professionals working on the same topic. The members of one of the student groups studying transference were particularly eloquent in writing about the difficulty of their process:

> One particularly durable artifact of the group process was how reading the experience of transference touched on significant childhood issues for the group members. The discussion of such intensely personal issues, combined with in-depth analysis of the experiences crossed some boundaries that we hadn't intended to cross. In retrospect, it may have been easier to pick less intense examples, or to have done our in-depth analyses on examples from outside the group. For example, we all discovered how we had transferred "unfinished business" about our parents into later relationships at one time or another, and how our doing so had … "distorted" all of those relationships to a certain (negative) degree: a sobering and somewhat embarrassing experience to have in front of classmates. We realized, however, that given the nature of transference, it might have been impossible to choose less intense personal examples (Chivers *et al*., 1999, pp. 3-4).

This description highlights, again, both the difficulties and the risks and the rewards of this approach to research. It also demonstrates how essential it is that the researchers have a basic level of trust in each other.

When research groups are made up of both faculty and graduate students (and all of the groups that we have participated in have had this mixture), there are further challenges. For the groups to function well, the faculty gradually have to let go of the authority that comes with their position, just as the student researchers need to gain confidence in their own discernment and come to trust that they will be taken seriously. This does not mean that as faculty we abdicate our responsibility or deny the value of our experience and training. Rather, it means that one of our primary tasks is to encourage other members of the group to become active participants and thus allow us gradually to become more like group members than group leaders. The sharing of our personal descriptions of the phenomenon being studied early in the process is an important part of this shift. The students are often surprised or even somewhat taken aback when they realize that we - their professors - struggle with issues of despair or forgiveness just as they do. It is this growing awareness of similarity, as well as of differences in personality and life circumstance, that allows for the experience of intimacy.

By bringing descriptions into the room whether through stories we tell, descriptions we write, or interviews that we conduct, we lay a foundation for the emergence of a new kind of authority. In his book, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*, Brother David Steindl-Rast (1984) discusses the basis for this different type of authority, which is very fluid. Authority comes, he says, from speaking to what is common to all, that is, speaking to the heart of the matter. In the context of our groups, such speaking takes the form of someone pointing to an aspect of the phenomenon we are studying, and bringing it into

focus. Someone might say, "What I am struck by is that in both of these descriptions there is a raging against a deep sense of helplessness." Speaking to the heart of the matter includes addressing the process of the group. I recall someone quietly noting that our group seemed just as confused about the direction our research ought to take as the people we interviewed were about making sense of their lives in the middle of their experience of despair. Such comments are typically followed by a sudden stillness, an audible expression of relief, or a collective acknowledgment of "Yes, this is how it is." In this respect, dialogal research groups have a good deal in common with clinical consultation groups.

For genuine dialogue to take place the researchers must be able to use disagreements constructively - to treat these as a basis for further exploration and not take them personally. Let me provide a brief example of such constructive use of disagreement since it is so very important for any kind of collaborative work, and because it is also one of the most reliable indicators of the healthy functioning of a group. This example comes from a course that I taught at Duquesne University, in Pittsburgh, USA, where the students worked in groups on topics they themselves had selected (Halling & Leifer, 1991). The group which I observed was focusing on what they called discovery. One of the group members had interviewed a woman who spoke of making an unpleasant discovery about the kind of person her grandmother was. At the time of the discovery the interviewee was in her late twenties. The interviewer, who was strongly influenced by psychoanalytic thought, questioned the possibility of anyone being so completely surprised by someone the person had known for an extended period of time. Although the rest of the group members did not seem to share their colleague's scepticism, they nonetheless looked carefully at all of the interviews they had done with this issue in mind. They also agreed that their sceptical colleague

should do a follow-up interview with the interviewee in question. This second interview brought a resolution to the matter since the interviewer came to the conclusion that although her preconception might have merit it did not appear to apply in this case. This example also demonstrates that the key principle in interpreting data in the dialogal approach is not finding a workable compromise but reaching the point where everyone can affirm that an interpretation or analysis does justice to the data. It also shows that intimacy does not negate differences or separateness, but requires that one be present to the other in his or her individuality.

While the notion of conducting research in a dialogal group may seem like a risky proposition, we have found that these can be navigated if certain conditions are present, or, at least, potentially present. One of the most obvious conditions is the belief that working in a group using personal experience is a valid way to do research. This means standing at a critical distance from conceptions of traditional research to consider another way of knowing, one that is poetic in dimension in that it involves pointing to experiences rather than encapsulating them. One of our group members studying despair had had a fair amount of experience doing quantitative research. About half way through our process she said that she realized she had to give up some assumptions she had about what research means. Most strikingly, she had to put aside the belief that one should keep one's own personal perspective out of the research.

Indeed, there has to be some confidence that experience is a valid source of insight into a given phenomenon. This faith may initially grow out of being in psychotherapy or doing psychotherapy, or having a spiritual direction, or engaging in other traditions that value reflection as a way of knowing. There also needs to be trust in the dialogal process; this is particularly important at times when there is no clear direction. Having at least one member who has already done research with a group can facilitate such trust. We believe this to be the case as we look at the times when we have worked with students with no experience doing qualitative research in a group; their faith initially seemed to be in us more than in the process. The fact that there are not a lot of specific guidelines to hold onto makes this very understandable. Of course, the challenge is to help the students or other inexperienced group members to move to a point where they have faith in the process.

Then there is the commitment that the topic under study be central to the group focus. This allows the phenomenon to take on a life and a presence within the group rather than being abstract and "out there." Indeed, there are times when the topic is palpable within the group. As Gendlin (1973) has written, "If experience appears, it talks back" (p. 294). This shift can be described as a release from a straining to hear and to see. It is an acknowledgment that seeing and hearing are already taking place among the members of the group and the phenomenon, and this shift in particular allows for a faith in the process. This does not mean that there are no secondary agendas of a personal nature at work, such as a desire for human contact or scholarly achievement, but the primary intention and concern is developing a shared understanding of the phenomenon.

To sustain this faith and commitment in any group, trust must grow among the group members - a trust that each one's experience will be treated carefully and not be judged, a trust that members will be open to each other's words even when their relevance is not evident, and a trust that allows us to be valued and be able to count on one another. At the start of the process it is enough that the group members share the hope that this is possible, because such trust, faith, and commitment requires sitting with each other over time before it can develop. We have found that it takes time for a sense of intimacy to develop among members of a research group.

Finally, to do dialogal research, researchers also need a relatively high tolerance, and even appreciation, for ambiguity. By its very nature, the research is not linear and often moves into areas that are unknown. The other side of this tolerance is a capacity to be surprised which depends on engagement, interest, and openness. For example, in doing the research on hopelessness we were under a deadline to present at a conference. Several weeks before we were scheduled to present we were not sure where we were, much less where we were going. The topic remained elusive. It was only when we spent a day together in a retreat that the path became clearer. We noticed that what we were experiencing was in some ways also reflective of the phenomenon we were studying. We realized it was murky, elusive, and best captured in metaphor. We were surprised and excited that our months of working and talking had led to an understanding of hopelessness far richer than we had dreamed

Conclusion

In ending, let me return to the problem of finding words to describe what we find in human experience, a challenging task according to Corradi Fiumara. I can hardly disagree with her because when I initially started to write this section, I had no idea what to say - I was speechless. Then I remembered what it was like in our groups, especially when we neared the end of our projects: when we were reflecting on our data and searching for a way to give expression to what was before us. Often, we would sit in silence, allowing ourselves to be with what was in the room and what we experienced in an embodied way. This sitting was especially difficult when we were studying despair: it seemed that the people we interviewed could barely describe their experience of being in that state of hopelessness. In our presentation, we wrote "Indeed, it was when we had the strongest sense of being lost, of being groundless, that we came to realize that our process was revealing to us the very essence of the phenomenon of

hopelessness … we found that the best way to give words to a phenomenon was to use metaphor, that is, to echo what our participants used to try to give voice and expression to an experience of devastating wordlessness" (Beck *et al.*, 2003, p. 343).

What enabled us to find words for the experience was first of all its enduring presence within us and amongst us, a presence that we could endure only because we were together. And while it is true that being so close to something can easily hinder seeing or reflecting on it, with a multiplicity of perspectives and a variety of ways of saying things, it seemed all but guaranteed that gradually we would be able to say something: One word leads to another, just as the first drop of water can be the beginning of a stream. Once, when even a few words are spoken, we can assess their applicability, and come up with others. This process is an intermingling of receptivity and creativity, of discovering truth and creating truth. As George Gusdorf writes (1965), "Speaking is not merely a means of expression, but a constitutive element of human reality" (p. 116). And speaking is a communal or collaborative activity. Thus, we not only seek allies and support for our own psychic survival, as Corradi Fiumara (2001) suggests, but we seek allies and co-workers because it is in the context of dialogue that presence and intimacy, truth and understanding, become possible.

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