



Dancing Between Embodied Empathy and Phenomenological Reflection

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Abstract

In phenomenological research, layered understandings emerge from a complex process of experiencing and reflection, engaged in by both researcher and participant. Researcher and participant engage in a dance, moving in and out of experiencing and reflection while simultaneously moving through a shared intersubjective space that is the research encounter. If researchers are to empathise - imaginatively project themselves into participants' experience - they need to be open to this intersubjective space. First, I describe and reflect upon two particular moments of empathy which have arisen in two different phenomenological research interviews. I then attempt to make sense of these encounters with reference to phenomenological theory and philosophy related to empathy and intersubjectivity. A final section discusses some dilemmas we face as researchers when we apply empathy in our phenomenological research practice and considers the epistemological status of our empathic findings.

I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the
wounded person. My hurt turns livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe.
(Walt Whitman, 1917)

Introduction

When two people are dancing well together, they do more than simply enact a series of steps: their shared movement blends them into one as music and choreography dissolve into elemental flow. Something similar can be said of phenomenological research, the essence of which cannot be captured by isolating particular methods and techniques. Instead, the research encounter between researcher and participant possesses dance-like qualities.

While the researcher may lead the dance at the outset, it soon becomes hard to distinguish who is leading and who is following as interactions and movements synchronise. The embodied intersubjective space between them no longer involves division but

connection. So, researcher and participant engage the dance, moving in and out of experiencing and reflection while simultaneously moving through a shared intersubjective space that is the research encounter. Then, after the dance, the researcher engages a solo waltz, once again moving in and out of (pre-reflective) experience and reflection as s/he engages multiple meanings emerging from the data. Different interpretations are tried out like dance steps. Eventually the researcher settles on particular meanings revealing possibilities that may excite, inform or point the way to future research.

The research process thus involves a gestalt which is both ambiguous and layered. The success of the 'dance' rests largely on the researcher's attitude and preparedness to be openly present to his or her

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'partner'. Initially, the researcher strives to be open to what is being communicated and to empathise. As Wertz notes, this requires a particular and "peculiar posture as well as the rigorous enactment of multiple active modes of understanding" (Wertz, 1983, p. 198). Here, "we cannot be spectators but must experience the joys and pains of our subjects in full detail and in our very depths if we are to faithfully know them" (Wertz, 1983, p. 204). This involves 'being with' rather than 'doing to'; it involves becoming fascinated with and immersed in the other; it involves spontaneous upsurges of empathy and intuition combined with intense reflective concentration and reflexive awareness. As Heidegger puts it: "Listening to ... is Dasein's existential way of Being-open as Being-with for others As a Being-in-the-world with Others ... Dasein is 'in thrall'" (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 206).

In this paper I focus on, and seek to explicate, the experience of such moments of "being-with" and *reflexive empathy* (Finlay, 2005). I aim to shed light on the dynamics of the dance which emerges out of the intersubjective spaces residing between researcher and participant, between empathy and reflection. First, I describe and reflect upon two particular moments of empathy which have arisen in two different phenomenological research interviews. I then attempt to make sense of these encounters with reference to various theoretical ideas relating to empathy and intersubjectivity. A final section focuses on some dilemmas we face as researchers when we apply empathy in our phenomenological research practice, including the challenge of deciding the ontological and epistemological status of our empathic findings.

Moments of Empathy and Reflection during Research

In phenomenological research layered understandings emerge from a complex process of experiencing and reflection, engaged in by *both* researcher and participant. Participants reflect on their experience while simultaneously experiencing the research relationship. Researchers, in turn, experience moments of intersubjective connection as they try to empathise with, and iteratively make sense of, participants' reflections on their own lived experience. At the same time, researchers seek to interrogate, reflexively, their own embodied experiencing: they strive to have "an ongoing conversation about the experience while simultaneously living in the moment" (Hertz, 1997, p. viii). Researcher and participant thus engage in a dance, moving in and out of experiencing and reflection while simultaneously moving through the

shared intersubjective space that is the research encounter.

The following illustrations from my own experience are intended to throw light on this multifaceted and elusive 'dance'.

Example 1: Kenny

The example below comes from some narrative case study research I undertook on the lived experience of having mental health problems (Finlay, 2004). Kenny was a participant in this study. He was a middle-aged man suffering from anxiety and depression - something he had struggled with for over three years. He told me his story. In the following quotation, Kenny tries to describe to me (Linda) what it was like to live through the early days of his breakdown, while I, in turn, try to reflect back his experience. (The extract here has been created from the interview transcript and reflexive notes I wrote after the interview).

Kenny: I was just shaking the whole time, having panic attacks. I locked myself in the bedroom. It took weeks and weeks before I would go out. I would read, submerge myself in books, escape. I wasn't interested in anything. I just wanted to be in my bed. I suppose in some ways it was my little nest. I was safe in my bedroom and nobody could get to us. The worst part of it was when I was thinking. Then it seemed to get worse. "What's happening to me? What am I doing?" Then I would get into a panic. I was scaring myself. It was a dreadful experience - one that I wouldn't wish on anyone. To be scared is one of the worst things. It is a method of torture.

Linda: It sounds incredibly scary - all the more so because it's being like, that was so different from the way you normally are.

Kenny: Yeah, I definitely wasn't me-self.

Linda: Was that the scariest bit, facing someone, facing yourself as someone you didn't know?

Kenny: I was just very fearful - I kept jumping at me own shadow.

As I was listening to Kenny speak, I suddenly realised that I was reacting quite strongly to him and became aware of my own bodily responses. I remember noticing how my arms were folded tightly across my stomach. I was protecting myself, but also 'holding my self in' and somehow 'holding myself together'. I then saw that Kenny had adopted the same posture as he recalled his trauma (had I mirrored his posture

or had he followed mine?). [The word 're-member' is significant here. Remembering is not

just a cognitive function: it's about reiterating responses in the body: we re-member.]

With us both holding ourselves, it seemed an important moment, one that called for me to tune into what we were both doing. I was a little surprised at the sensations and my reactions. Usually, I would interpret this non-verbal gesture as representing a symbolic wish to protect oneself from others or a way of giving oneself some nurturing/comforting. But here, in this situation, I was somehow sensing an additional, even different, interpretation. I checked it out with Kenny:

Linda: As you're speaking and remembering, Kenny, I can see you're holding yourself tightly. And I'm doing the same as I'm listening to you. [Shared laughter]. It's like you're trying to hold yourself together. Is it like, kinda, to stop yourself falling apart? Is that what it was like for you?

Kenny: Yeah. I would go off to bed and just hold myself like that. Sometimes it seemed like for hours. One minute I was all right and the next I could just go into a rage about the simplest thing. It could be a trivial thing and I'd lose it completely. Again I sought the sanctuary of the bedroom. I knew that there I couldn't hurt people. The worse thing about it was that I was feeling guilty and that made me get more angry.

I felt his confusion: his rage against himself and this crazy 'alien' it seemed he had become. I felt his fear of losing himself, of losing it in general, and his concern that he might hurt others in his anger and craziness. I felt his guilt about this anger and understood why he might want to lock himself away. It was the only place he could be safe. Perhaps it was the only place he could recover himself to reassure himself that he was still there.

Later, when I was analysing the transcript, I replayed this dialogue over and over as a way of helping me to focus on what it would be like to be Kenny. I adopted that holding posture and 're-membered' the (my? his?) emotions. Again I got that strong sense of 'holding together' that which was falling apart and holding in the craziness and rage so that they didn't break out and destroy others.

Example 2: Jenny

In another research project, I was interviewing a therapist about her relationships with patients. Jenny, the therapist in question, had been threatened by a male patient who had a violent sexual history. She described her sense of foreboding that this patient, whom she saw as predatory, would eventually 'get her'. This was a theme to which she returned repeatedly. The following extract has been taken from my reflexive diary where I reflected upon and elaborated a passage from the interview transcript:

Jenny: He's ... extremely creepy. He will come up, want to touch you He's a bit predatory in that he will follow you down corridors ... He preyed across the gym ... crept up behind me, saying ... "They [colleagues] can't watch all of you all the time ... I'll get you." ... He even does things like, there's a large observation window, and even if he can't physically get to you, he'll stand there and rub his groin and drool He'll crawl across the floor to get you.

In my analysis of this interview, I found myself reading and re-reading the transcript with a growing sense of foreboding in the pit of my stomach. In the process of hermeneutic reflection, I started to imagine how I would feel in Jenny's shoes, stalked by this predator. What I experienced was literally an embodied reaction.

Suddenly, the world begins to look different. Everything closes round me and somehow grows darker. I can hear the hollow beating of my heart. I think about the unit Jenny works in, seeing it now in terms of the spaces that are safe versus those that are dangerous. She has to walk down public corridors all the time with full awareness that she is not 'safe'. I feel fear, a sense of menace where time is no defence. I experience her loathing, her disgust - my skin creeps in response to his creepiness. I see this same image of a man drooling and clawing at the window to get at me - it won't go away. It feels real, like it has happened to me. It is as if I have become Jenny. (Finlay, 2003, pp. 116-117)

Reflections

Churchill (1998, p. 180) has noted that "We sense in and through our own bodies the intentions and affects that animate the others, and we simultaneously understand our tacit experience as significant of the other's expression". Through bodily mirroring Kenny

and attending to my embodied reactions in relation to Jenny, it seemed that, in both cases, I transposed myself in my imagination and momentarily became them. In the words of Merleau-Ponty, “It is as if the other person’s intention inhabited my body” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 185). Through this imaginative (yet embodied and material) transposal, I strove to empathise with my participants. A particular significance of this empathy was the way in which I gained new understandings and even, in the case of Jenny, new ‘re-membrances’.

The two research encounters presented above show how empathy can be understood as a kind of *openness to a relational embodied intersubjectivity* (Finlay, 2005). My effort to be sensitive to my participants’ embodied experience, meanings and feelings resulted in an imaginative projection on my part as well as our bodily mirroring. These were not particularly extraordinary moments of empathy. During the course of both interviews there were other examples I could focus on. As I reflect, I see that even at an everyday (and arguably more superficial) level empathy routinely occurs. For instance, when we see another person giggle, yawn or wince in pain, we, too, can feel the same impulse bubble up inside ourselves. This can overflow in a kind of mirroring relationship. In this mirroring, there is a cross identification where one’s own separate identity is somehow transcended (Levin, 1988).

Levinas suggests that “a reflection by *Einfühlung* opens the field of transcendental intersubjectivity” (1973, cited in Churchill, 1998, p. 181). Is this how we should understand what is occurring in such moments of empathic connection? To what extent did I truly empathise with my participants as opposed to merely engaging in a misguided form of projective identification or countertransference? Did I simply mirror them bodily or was my experiencing reflective of their experiencing? Was our mutual experiencing a product - and demonstration - of the intersubjective space we were sharing? And what light might phenomenological theory and philosophy shed on the process?

Understanding Empathy

Phenomenological theorists and philosophers have described empathy in different ways. In general, however, they have highlighted the significance of openness, transcendence, intersubjectivity and embodiment.

Empathy as Openness

Empathy - arising from the German term *Einfühlung* - means the process of gently ‘feeling into’ or sensing

another person (or object) in order to better appreciate it. When applied to the human world, empathy is generally understood as ‘entering another’s world’ or ‘stepping into their shoes’. In his classic definition (developed from concepts of experiencing and focusing formulated by Gendlin, 1962) Carl Rogers describes empathy as a ‘process’ rather as a ‘state’, and as one possessing several facets:

It means entering the private world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it. It involves being sensitive, moment to moment, to the changing felt meanings which flow in this other person It means temporarily living in his/her life, moving about in it delicately without making judgements ... as you look with fresh and unfrightened eyes at elements of which the individual is fearful. It means frequently checking with him/her as to the accuracy of your sensings, and being guided by the responses you receive By pointing to the possible meanings in the flow of his/her experiencing you help the person to ... experience the meanings more fully To be with another in this way means that for the time being you lay aside the views and values you hold for yourself in order to enter another’s world without prejudice ... you lay aside your self (Rogers, 1975, pp. 4-5)

According to Rogers, empathy involves a sensitivity and *openness* to the other where I, to a degree, leave aside my own judgements. (There are similarities here with the way in which phenomenological researchers engage the *epoché*).

Applying these ideas to my encounter with Kenny, I believe that I was sensitive to Kenny’s changing felt meanings. Certainly, I consciously employed Gendlin’s (1981) technique of *focusing* on the ‘bodily felt sense’ when I explicitly drew attention to our bodily holding posture. This focusing, according to Gendlin, enables the body to bring the words, memory, image, insight needed to solve a ‘problem’ - in this case, articulating Kenny’s emotions. Our embodiment, Levin (1985, p. 73) reminds us, is “the gift through whose receptivity and responsiveness we may begin to retrieve that redeeming experience of Being”.

It was also important that I checked out my emergent understandings with Kenny while trying to stay open to learning new ways of being. By focusing so intently and intensely on Kenny’s experience during my periods of reflection and analysis, I also

experienced a sense of momentarily laying my own identity aside.

My empathic resonance in relation to Jenny's experience occurred at a more imaginary level (though it was, of course, still 'real' to me) during the post-interview analysis stage. As a result, I was not able to check out my sensings with Jenny. Even so, I believed that I had entered part of Jenny's world and embraced it temporarily as mine.

In both encounters, it seemed that I experienced a progressive, iterative attunement (Finlay, 2006), a process which Abram describes thus:

When my body thus responds to the mute solicitation of another being, that being responds in turn, disclosing to my senses some new aspect or dimensions that in turn invites further exploration. By this process my sensing body gradually attunes itself to the style of this other presence ... as the other seems to adjust itself to my own style and sensitivity. In this manner, the simplest thing may become a world for me, as conversely, the thing or being comes to take its place more deeply in *my* world. (Abram, 1996, p. 52)

Empathy as Transcendence

The work of Edith Stein (1916/1989), Husserl's assistant and student, offers particular insights into the process of empathy. In her book *On the Problem of Empathy*, based on her doctoral dissertation, she explicated empathy as a unique and irreducible kind of *intentional* experience where we strive to feel into another's intentionality. When embodied sense perception and cognitive inference are combined, she argued, we experience another person as a unified whole through empathy. In this empathy, we are led by an experience beyond ourselves. "A 'we', not an 'I', is the subject of the empathizing ... through empathizing ... we experience others" (Stein, 1916/1989, p. 18).

Stein posited that this empathizing is enacted through different modalities of accomplishment. First, the experience of the Other emerges before me: "it faces me as an object (such as the sadness I 'read in another's face')" (1916/1989, p. 10). Then, I imaginatively put myself in the place of the Other - reproducing the form of their experience in my own imagination. Finally, as the Other's experience has been clarified, the experience faces me again in a richer, fully explicated way. These stages represent three different facets of empathy.

Applying these ideas to the Kenny encounter in particular, we can see Stein's first stage (what she calls "the emergence of the experience") in the way that I initially perceived Kenny's fear and anger towards his behaving in such an alien way. This fear and anger first appeared to me as an object. I 'read' his fear in his words and non-verbal expressions in much the same way as I perceived that he was a middle-aged man. It stood in front of me as something objective, external, an almost palpable 'fact'. As I gained a clearer appreciation of his emotions, however, my perspective on it changed (Stein's second stage of "the fulfilling explication"). Here I seemed to get sucked into his emotions; I was now inside them, able to see where his fear and anger were directed. Rather than facing Kenny and his emotions, I stood next to him facing the objects of his fear and anger. I began to experience something of what he had experienced. Finally - in Stein's third phase of "comprehensive objectification" - I withdrew from Kenny's experience and, in following through my phenomenological analysis, I faced it once more as an object. My understanding of his fear was now more distant but also deeper and more nuanced.

As regards my reflections of Jenny's experience, in psychodynamic terms it could be said that my attempt at projection distorted into undue identification or even introjection. Phenomenologists would see it differently, however, as a more conscious imaginative transference. I believe Stein would accept the possibility of this empathy occurring despite the fact that it was a virtual, as opposed to face-to-face, 'encounter'. She might suggest, though, that I had become so caught up in her second stage that I did not progress sufficiently beyond it.

Empathy as Intersubjective Co-constitution

Husserl collaborated with Stein and continued to develop these ideas of empathy in his exploration of intersubjectivity (co-subjectivity) (Michau, n.d.). He revisited them several times over his career (most notably in *Ideas II*). His foundational argument was that intersubjectivity is present *prior to* any concrete perceptual encounter with another and that it is this very intersubjectivity which allows for empathy. Moreover, this intersubjectivity is embodied (as evidenced in both my research encounters). "In order to establish a mutual relationship between myself and an Other, in order to communicate something to him, a Bodily relation ... must be instituted In empathy I participate in the other's positing" (Husserl, 1928/1989, pp. 176-7). Then, Husserl explained, he imaginatively transposes himself to the other's place, to follow the other; their motives become his "quasi-motives". (My experience of

reflecting on Jenny's situation, in which I embraced her motives as my "quasi-motives", could perhaps be an example of this imaginative transposal). As Churchill notes, in reference to Husserlian ideas, it is through this process of transfer and projection into the other's world that one "co-performs the other's meaning acts and thereby grasps the meaning" (Churchill, 2003, p. 29).

Through such a process, Husserl saw empathy as constituting the other as well as being the condition of possible knowledge of the world (and ourselves). It is through the experience of an Other's experience that we can begin to see the world beyond our own subjectivity and that of the Other. The 'real' or "objective world, *depends* upon the transcendence of foreign subjectivity" (Husserl, 1959, cited in Zahavi, 2001, p. 159). Thompson describes this process thus: "I experience myself as recognizably sentient 'from without', that is, from your perspective, the perspective of another. In this way, one's sense of self-identity, even at the most fundamental level of embodied agency, is inseparable from recognition by another (Thompson, 2001, pp. 19-20).

The idea that we only come to know the world (and ourselves) through the Other makes sense to me when I think about the Kenny encounter and recognise how the fresh insights I gained into the possible meanings of 'holding oneself' came about through our bodily mirroring. Through the process of reflexive hermeneutic reflection (Finlay, 2003), I have also been able to understand something more about my own habitual responses and the impact that I, the researcher, might have had on Kenny.

Empathy as Embodied Intertwining

Merleau-Ponty elaborated Husserl's ideas by placing even greater emphasis on the body as enabling empathy. "*Empathy* goes from body to mind It is through his body that the other person's soul is soul in my eyes" (Merleau-Ponty, 1960/1964, pp. 169 & 172). In his embodied experience, Merleau-Ponty suggested,

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, two sides of one and the same phenomenon, and the anonymous existence of which my body is the ever-renewed trace henceforth inhabits both bodies simultaneously. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 354)

In his later tantalising, though disconcertingly mysterious, work *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty (1968) carried these ideas further. Here, he focused on the intersubjective 'intertwining' where we can act as a kind of 'living mirror' to each other. He employed the radical metaphors of 'flesh' (highlighting the elemental impermeability of our bodily inherence in the field of Being) and 'chiasm' (emphasising the interpenetration of body and world) to argue that existences (beings) are intertwined in a dynamic of doubling, where the flesh of the world and myself as flesh are one. Through carnal intersubjectivity, "flesh meets flesh in the flesh of the world, and man can now become a living mirror for his fellow man" (McCleary, 1964, p. 97).

Merleau-Ponty's ideas become particularly cogent when I reflect on my uncertainty about whether it was I who mirrored Kenny's bodily expression or if he mirrored me. "I live in the facial expressions of the other, as I feel him living in mine" (Merleau-Ponty, 1960/1964b, p. 146). Empathy is not just a one-way process. My understanding of Kenny as an Other is mirrored by Kenny: he in turn empathises, responding to me (from his own vantage point) as an Other.

Merleau-Ponty's ideas appear even more relevant to my encounter with Jenny. Perhaps I had become so thoroughly immersed in what I saw as her experience that boundaries between us blurred. I lost sight of my own identity to such an extent that Jenny's 'experience' continues to be 're-membered' by me. I have a vivid recollection of Jenny's fear as something that happened to me, even as I know it did not. As Merleau-Ponty poignantly explains: "To the extent that I understand, I no longer know who is speaking and who is listening" (1960/1964b, p. 97).

Empathy as an Iterative, Dynamic Process

In summary, while these different phenomenological philosophers each emphasise particular aspects of empathy, all tend to agree that *embodied intersubjectivity* provides the basis on which we are able to perceive the other. Experiencing empathy is possible for everyone, provided that we are open to the Other. To achieve empathy we iteratively engage in different strategies such as bodily mirroring ('quasi-reflection'), imaginative self-transposal (*sich Hineinphantasieren* and *sich Hineinversetzen*) and re-enacting the other's experience (*nacherleben*). Having imaginatively projected ourselves into the Other's situation and identified with it - and providing that we stay focused on the Other's experience - we are able to experience empathy. By transposing the Other as a possibility for myself, self and Other have, to a degree, been transcended, and it is this which allows self/Other understanding. (See *Figure 1*, which

offers a pictorial model of this iterative, dynamic process).

In my 'encounters' with Kenny and Jenny, I moved through these distinct stages. Initial perception/recognition was followed by projection and explication, and then by renewed objectification as I engaged in more academic analysis. While I was in some danger of losing focus on my participants as I examined my own embodied responses, I believe that, in both cases, I achieved a degree of empathy (understanding something of *their* intentionality) and that this process transcended our individual subjectivities.

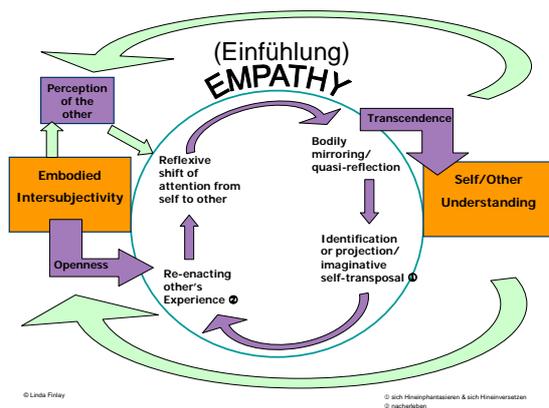


Figure 1. Empathy as a process

In the research context, it is important to acknowledge that the empathy I achieved occurred in large part through reflection. Rather than being experienced as a spontaneous intuition, empathy grew out of more active, conscious processing, out of reflective engagement with the question: What is it like to be this individual in this situation? How does the world have 'being' in his or her eyes? It bears emphasis that empathy and reflection go hand-in-hand.

Applying Levels of Empathy in Practice

In the encounter between Kenny and myself, there were moments when I did not know who was responding to whom. In my projective experience as Jenny, I lost sight of my own identity as I embraced her 'memories'. Are these examples of empathy, or could they be seen as forms of fantasy or distorted identification? Psychodynamically orientated theorists might suggest that my experience in respect of Jenny was indeed some version of projective identification and that my responses to Kenny resulted from an unconscious process, a product of both transference and countertransference - in other words, that I was picking up something Kenny was projecting onto me. Phenomenologists would argue that a more conscious

process is taking place: instead of unconscious transference, researchers employ an active imaginative movement into the other.

In phenomenological terms, the key question at stake is to what extent an 'intersubjective merging' of Self-Other is necessary or even desirable as we seek to apply empathy in our research. The second question which challenges us concerns the epistemological status of our findings: What claims can we make about our empathic findings? The next section discusses both these dilemmas.

The Dance of Intimacy and Alterity

Does empathy arise from the dissolution of boundaries, a merging of self-other (a mutual reversibility)? Or does empathy come from recognition of difference? In this regard, Merleau-Ponty and Stein seem to disagree slightly.

Merleau-Ponty suggests that, in an encounter, the people involved are 'opennesses'. As these 'opennesses' crisscross, a new intercorporeal being can emerge. "The world and I are within one another" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, p. 123). Here Merleau-Ponty is referring to a "reciprocal insertion and intertwining" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, p. 138) of others in ourselves and of us in them, where self-understanding and other-understanding merge in mutual transformation. The toucher and the touched are of the same material, the same flesh; body and world are intertwined. "The world is at the heart of the flesh" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, p. 136); the flesh of the world and oneself as flesh are intertwined. Something of the same (what he calls "an anonymous visibility") inhabits both participants in an encounter across a corporeal intersubjective space.

Stein, on the other hand, is clear that it is vital that boundaries are not dissolved. If this happens, there is the danger that the focus shifts back to *my* subjectivity. In this case, *Einfühlung* no longer entails understanding the Other's experience from *their* perspective. While not denying that a feeling of oneness can occur, she argues that "empathy is not a feeling of oneness" (Stein, 1916/1989, p. 17). Understanding comes from perceiving the differences between the Other and I. The selfness of 'I' is "brought into relief in contrast with the otherness of the other" (1916/1989, p. 38).

The question, then, is how to understand 'intersubjectivity'. Does it refer to the lifeworld of different 'I's in community (as Stein and Husserl indicate), or is it a more committed or transpersonal blending (which Merleau-Ponty seems to imply)?

Perhaps there is room for different versions (levels?) of empathy involving varying degrees of identification, objectification and intersubjectivity. Sometimes we see ourselves in others while, at other times, we see others in ourselves. Sometimes we touch others and so understand something about our objectivity which, if we reflect on it, may help us to better understand our subjectivity. At other times we are touched by others and so touch their subjectivity. We can feel ourselves touched at the same time as touching (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968). Perhaps it is sufficient to endorse Husserl's notion that intersubjectivity is an *a priori* feature of our experience of a world full of different people, where we may share more similarities with some (and even blend with them) rather than with others.

Rather than focus on the subject-object problematic, I suggest that we focus on the way we are already in the public social world, intersubjectively engaged with others (whether they are present or not). "A 'self' is never self-enclosed but always in the openness of relationships" (Todres, 2004, p. 41). Heidegger (1962) has drawn our attention to this 'Being-with' (*Mitsein*), where he suggests that *Dasein* knows an Other as well as oneself. *Dasein* is, according to him, ontologically disclosed to us - before it gives itself to understanding - through our everyday engagement in our common world. In a move, possibly more radical (though much less developed) than Merleau-Ponty's ideas, Heidegger thus denies empathy as a process in which I try to grasp the (foreign) experience of an Other. Instead of splitting subject and object, he sees the 'they' (the Other) as already being a part of the self of *Dasein*. The 'I' is a derivation of Being-with and is formed on the basis of a mutual recognition in the intersubjective world. "Empathy' does not first constitute Being-with; only on the basis of Being-with does 'empathy' become possible" (1927/1962, p. 162). This intimacy then forms the opening onto othernesses as alterity and of the possibilities of the authentic Self.

Bringing together the ideas of Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, I concur that empathy is more about mutuality and a movement between 'intimacy and alterity'. This is the dance. With fluidity and suppleness in our relations with others, we merge and then draw back, in instinctive recognition that "the body-world boundary is a porous one, permitting of unceasing interpenetrability" (Aanstoos, 1991, p. 95).

Levels of Empathy

Applying these ideas to the research encounter, I suggest that we inevitably move in, out and through different intensities of empathy and distance during different moments of every relational encounter. In

one moment, a researcher who is *open* to his or her participant may discover some linking personal experience that enables or anchors a degree of empathy. In the next moment, the researcher may get thoroughly pulled into an identification so intense that the sensation of merging with the participant may be experienced.

This idea of levels of empathy has been picked up by a number of authors. Elsewhere (Finlay, 2005), I have proposed three interlinked dimensions of empathic experience ("acting into", "connecting of" and "merging with") and suggested that these coexist as different "possibilities of experience". Hart (1999) offers nine different levels or facets of empathic knowing which occur in therapy. In particular, he contrasts "external empathy" with "deep empathy". In the former, the therapist acts as observer, perceiving another's experience *as if s/he* were they. In "deep empathy", there is a more direct knowing where subject-object are transcended. Hart explains: "As knowing stretches into more direct, less inferential modes, distance between ourselves and others diminishes, and the possibility of deep empathy opens" (1999, p. 122).

Todres, with specific reference to psychotherapy, recognises how therapists can develop a rhythm of interactive 'being-with' where closeness and distance are *simultaneously* experienced. The challenge, as Todres (1990) notes, lies in "being close enough to the immediacy of the situation to experience what is happening, yet also to be able to distance oneself from such immediacy in order to become interested in the quality of interaction as a phenomenon" (p. 40). In another paper, Todres (2004) relates this process to research acknowledging the paradoxical quality of 'embodied understanding'. He suggests researchers "forge a fruitful distance from the specific embodied occasion by allowing some generalities that are transferable across these occasions" while they also "remain responsively connected to the aliveness of the specific experiential occasions, inviting the bodily 'more' of participation" (p. 52).

Limits of Researcher Understanding

The degree of openness and permeability that we 'allow' ourselves as researchers will, of course, be contingent on the situation and the individuals involved. Our values and beliefs about what is an appropriate way to understand another will also be significant. For myself, I am content to use myself in much the same way that I would use myself in therapy as a 'therapeutic tool'. I appreciate the need to be reflexive about the ethics and impact of my researcher role. Aware that I sometimes treat research participants as if they were my clients, I strive to be

conscious of the possible consequences - in particular, the impact on participants (Finlay, 2003). I recognise that it can be hard for me, a mental health therapist, to 'turn off' responses that have become a way of *being* for me. Further, my behaviour and intentions will impact on my participants. This means that any understandings which emerge from research may well be (at least in part) a product of the specific researcher-participant relationship and contingent on the researcher's style.

I thus remain cautious about making any definitive epistemological and ontological claims about my research findings. I recognise that my findings involve interpretation and that interpretive research involves engaging in *possible* meanings. I always question the extent to which I am capturing another's experience (as distinct from simply projecting my own). Recognising that, in the research examples above, my findings remain tentative and emergent, I believe that I have nevertheless captured something of Kenny's and Jenny's experiences. However, I would also claim that the *only* access to them as 'Other' that I have is through my imagination and/or by tapping into those rich, intersubjective, relational moments. Ultimately, the goal for phenomenological research is less about ensuring accurate empathy and more about gaining insight and understanding (which may be about the individual participant, my Self or the phenomenon of interest more generally).

Conclusion

This article has explored the process of empathy, highlighting its relational, embodied, intersubjective foundations. Examples taken from my own research have demonstrated the value of researchers' remaining open to their participants and aware of their own embodied reactions (Finlay, 2005; Finlay,

2006). I have sought to show how empathy is multifaceted and multilayered, and involves degrees of transcendence which are implicated in constituting both self and other. I have also argued that empathy can be particularly illuminating when researchers exploit opportunities to be reflexive and to utilise phenomenological reflection.

The challenges confronting us as phenomenological researchers are many and varied. In particular, we need to:

- (1) be sensitive and open to the participant's experience;
- (2) remain focused on our participants rather than ourselves;
- (3) utilise different opportunities to empathise through mirroring the Other and imaginatively projecting ourselves into the Other's experience;
- (4) dance between moments of intimacy and alterity as simultaneous possibilities of experience;
- (5) tune into the intersubjective relational space between researcher and participant;
- (6) reflexively exploit the different opportunities stemming from levels of empathy through a process of hermeneutic, phenomenological reflection.

Stein suggests that "the feeling of oneness and the enrichment of our own experience become possible through empathy" (Stein, 1916/1989, p. 18). I agree. Moving in the space between empathy and reflection, the relational dance which takes place during the research encounter has the potential to enrich both researcher and participant.

About the Author

Linda Finlay works as an academic consultant and freelance lecturer in the UK. She writes for the Open University and also supervises post-graduate dissertations at the University of East London. She is a qualified occupational therapist and an academic psychologist whose areas of teaching include social psychology and qualitative research methodology. But it is in the world of phenomenology that she has found a home. Here she is able to bring her professional identities together through her research on the lived experience of disability using hermeneutic-existential approaches. Linda is best known for her textbooks on occupational therapy in mental health and her work on reflexivity in qualitative research. Since 2003, she has published three books: *The Practice of Psychosocial Occupational Therapy* (Nelson Thornes); *Qualitative Research for Health Professionals: Challenging Choices* (Wiley), a volume co-edited with Claire Ballinger; and *Reflexivity: A Practical Guide for Researchers in Health and Social Science* (Blackwells), co-edited with Brendan Gough.

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