

# Research Project

## Title:

When therapy gets difficult: A qualitative phenomenological analysis of a client's experience of a difficult moment in the therapeutic process.

## Introduction:

As I began planning my research project as part of my Gestalt psychotherapy training at WPP, my initial interest centred around the question of 'what works in therapy?' I started my literature review by looking into rupture and repair, challenge and support, and what facilitates change in therapy. Much of the existing research is from the perspective of the therapist, and I wanted to redress this balance by exploring the client's experience. What eventually emerged was the need for more research into the ways that clients make use of therapy to overcome obstacles to change, and the ways in which they make meaning of significant events in therapy. In my own experience of therapy, difficult moments have been key to deepening my understanding of myself in relationship, so I decided to narrow the focus of my project to a difficult moment in the therapeutic process, from the perspective of the client.

In order to keep the project small and manageable enough, I chose to interview one participant about her experience of a difficult moment in therapy and to analyse the resulting data phenomenologically.

## Literature Review:

The search for what works in psychotherapy has fuelled research and sparked debate for over 50 years (Sparks et al, 2008, p.453). The significance of 'common factors' dates back to a 1936 article by Rosenzweig, in which he suggested that the effectiveness of different therapy approaches had more to do with their common elements than with the theoretical tenets on which they were based. Research increasingly indicates that the client is primarily responsible for change in therapy (Bohart and Tallman, 1999; Duncan et al, 2004). Lambert, (Asay and Lambert, 1999) a leading psychotherapy researcher, has estimated that 75% or more of the improvement in psychotherapy clients is due to client-related factors.

There have been two meta-analyses of the research into client experiences in therapy. Elliot and James (1989) carried out a meta-synthesis of the first 40 years of literature on client experiences in therapy, where "the two most common perceived helpful aspects of therapy were relational: facilitative therapist characteristics and client self-expression" (Elliot, 2008, p.1). More recently, Timulak (2007) published a meta-synthesis of a subset of this literature – client experiences of the impacts of helpful significant therapy events.

Some of the recent studies into psychological change from the clients' perspective have identified the

importance of difficult moments in therapy. Carey et al (2007, p.184) identified the importance of “facilitating progress towards an impasse and then supporting the person while they experience this impasse and develop insights to resolve it rather than trying to avoid it.” A study by Binder et al (2009, p.255) utilised a phenomenological approach to explore the ways former patients give meaning to therapeutic change. They discovered that ‘meaning’ had two sub-dimensions: having old beliefs corrected resulted in a vacuum out of which new meanings have to be created. Elliot (2008, p.5) suggests that client agency may be most apparent when clients confront difficulties in the therapeutic process, and he encourages further research into “the complex processes by which clients actively use their therapy to overcome obstacles to change.”

The aim of this study has been to further advance our understanding of clients’ experiences of difficult moments in the therapeutic process, and by using a phenomenological approach, to find out how the client has made meaning of these moments.

### *Method:*

## Research Design

My over-arching approach was phenomenological – giving voice to the experiential accounts of participants (Binder et al, 2009, p.251), and focusing on clients’ lived experiences and the meanings they place on those experiences (Sherwood, 2001, p.2). As researcher, my aim was to bracket my previous assumptions, not in an attempt to be objective or unbiased, but in order to be open to seeing the world differently, “putting aside how things supposedly are and focusing instead on how they are experienced” (Finlay, 2008, p.2). Embodiment was also an important aspect of my approach. Finlay (2006) argues the case for researchers attending reflexively to the body – both participant and researcher, rather than focusing only on the words used. “The body not only connects us to the world, but also offers us the way to understand that world (including ourselves and others)” (p.2).

## Participant

After my research proposal was accepted by the WPP research ethics committee, I sent an email to all students at WPP outlining my project and asking if anyone would like to take part (see appendix 1). Several students responded, and an interview was arranged with one of them. In order to sort out potential teething troubles, I set up a pilot interview, with the possibility of using the material for the project, subject to informed consent of the participant. In the end, there were no teething troubles, and she agreed to the interview being used for the project.

## Ethical considerations

The participant was given an information sheet about the project and interview notes (see appendices 2 and 4), and we discussed any concerns before she agreed to being interviewed, and again before she

gave consent for her material to be used (see appendix 3). We took time to look at confidentiality and privacy in detail, and we also looked at what support and care was in place both during and after the interview. We discussed how the data would be safely stored, and the participant was fully informed of what would happen to all records. In order to protect her identity, we agreed to change her name, and to anonymise any details that might identify her. The participant was aware of her right to withdraw consent at any time prior to submission of the assignment during the next academic year.

## Interview

The data was collected in a semi-structured interview, where the aim was to invite the participant into reflective mode, as well as trying to grasp the freshness of experience by asking questions such as: Can you paint the scene for me? Can you describe what happened? What kinds of feelings were going on for you then? How do you feel now as you tell me the story? (see appendix 5).

The interview took place in the middle of a busy training weekend, where we claimed a calm space and time by taking care to choose which room to use, choosing where to sit in the room, using our breathing to calm and centre ourselves, and consciously attempting to bracket any outside concerns. By taking time to orient ourselves in time and space, as well as attending to our physicality, the interview took on a reflexive embodied approach (Finlay, 2005), where my task was “not simply to listen to another’s story, but to be open to being-with the participant in relationship” (p.11).

From the start of the interview safety was of paramount importance. The participant chose to revisit “a nagging memory, but it feels like it can be really contained. I’m not feeling unresolved about it in any way.” Even so, in revisiting a memory, especially of a difficult experience, there is always a risk of re-traumatising, and throughout this interview we checked out how the participant was feeling and responding to her recollection moment-by-moment. Even when she was in touch with “the horrible pain” that was part of this memory, the participant felt grounded in present time and was not being drawn back into reliving what had been so painful. She was able to view the memory at one remove, so while it was still very real and vivid, she was not being triggered or re-traumatised in any way.

## Analysis

I followed Finlay’s idea of engaging with the data through dwelling, wonder, evidencing and ambivalence, spending much time with the raw data and allowing implicit meanings to come to the fore (Finlay, 2011, p228). I stayed with these implicit meanings, “letting the phenomenon itself guide the study of it and letting the method emerge” (Finlay, 2011, p.188). What emerged was an embodied, reflexive approach - staying as close to the description as I could, while noticing my reflexive, embodied responses to it in a back and forth movement between the data and the present moment. My approach was also hermeneutic, using interpretation to unveil “hidden meanings of lived experience” (Finlay, 2011, p.112), as well as reflexively acknowledging my own involvement in the research. My aim was to “capture the complexity and ambiguity of the lived world being described” (Finlay, 2008, p.6), and I made use of metaphor in an attempt to elucidate layers of meaning. There was also a narrative element to the

analysis, as her story spanned the time before, during and after the difficult moment being described.

### *Findings:*

As I spent time dwelling with the data, four themes began to take shape – *isolation vs contact, the interplay of past and present, the paradox of agency, and self-anger vs self-compassion*. I will look at each of these themes in turn.

## Isolation vs contact

The difficult moment was not an isolated experience, but a process that happened over and over again during Becca's training modules. It was a very unresolved process, where something would trigger strong responses of shame and anger, leaving her unable to make contact with anyone from that place.

This same fucking cycle again, same fucking place. The shame was SO intense. Time and time again I'd left here distressed, confused, and hurting, hurting, hurting.

In that familiar place of being flooded with shame and anger, all energy is tightly bound up in self-protection. It's a fortress, a complete cut-offness between self and other. There is a strong desire to disappear down a hole, a feeling of distress, and an inability to make any contact. Her tutor would consistently reach out in an attempt to connect, but all Becca could do was withdraw and cut herself off.

This is my hedgehog place. Don't be nice to me. Don't pay attention. Don't hug or stroke me. Just let me disappear.

And yet, something different happened in the difficult moment that Becca has chosen to describe. What was different this time? Somehow, in spite of her isolation, she was also aware on some level of a compassionate other, her tutor, sitting by, staying close, patiently waiting with her. In these difficult moments, even when it had seemed that there was no contact, something of this quality of care was getting in, was getting through. It is as though a seed of compassionate contact was growing unseen over a period of two years or so.

## Interplay of past and present

Becca's tutor offered her a choice – "It's your choice. You can keep going there, and you will be alone there, or, you can do something different this time". In this moment, the past and present came head-to-head. In many similar unresolved experiences from her past, energy was built-up, trapped inside, and never found release. In the moment being described, once again this accumulated trapped energy from the past was building up inside. In the room as she recalls the memory, her voice becomes deliberate and emphatic, and I notice that I am exhaling very deeply in order to keep myself grounded and centred. We check out that Becca is not being retriggered as she recalls her physical response to this moment of choice:

Not a good feeling. A horrible, horrible feeling – like a fucking great fist in my tummy. A sick, sick feeling. Owning that there might be a better choice was horribly painful. In fact it was more painful than where I was.

There is both urgency and potential resulting from the trapped energy looking for release in this moment.

And, there is a paradox. As well as urgency, there is also a spaciousness in this moment of choice. In the foreground is urgency, tension, and trapped energy from the past, but there is something else around the edges of present awareness - a timeless knowing. There is a mutual recognition that 'now is the time' – there is enough support in place to try something different. Time seems to slow down as Becca becomes aware that as well as offering her a difficult choice, her tutor has made herself very available for contact – through her tone, her words, and their shared history.

In this spaciousness, the knowing that 'now is the time' happens both cognitively and on a subtle felt-sense level, from a deep part of her being and from a deep part of her history. This aspect of her experience is intangible, and it becomes harder to find words to capture the essence. An image emerges:

It's almost like the old Doctor Who and when it used to do the old start, and it'd be like a kaleidoscope tunnel. It was like something in my kaleidoscope tunnel of my past realised that I could look up.

In contrast with the turbulent trapped energy looking for release, the action that emerges is simple and gentle. There is a child-like trust and innocence in her action, as the block that has been in place for so long has dissolved.

I looked up. I looked at my tutor. I absolutely remember the moment of looking. I remember deciding to look up from my shame. I didn't have to keep looking down, I could come out of this kaleidoscope and look up

In this experience, the past plays a significant role in changing the present. The past brings with it all that it knows and all that it has experienced. The description of the kaleidoscope tunnel indicates a moment of disorientation, a void where the past no longer holds sway, but the present has not yet tried something different. This interplay between past and present was key to making a change.

There's something in the past, something in the now, and the connection of the two – the moment of decision.

The process was very powerful, very meaningful, very profound, where I slightly managed to change a behaviour, so it was the start of recovery....

### *The paradox of agency*

Becca's realisation that she had a choice was dependent on several factors, one of the key ones being her discovery of self-agency. Her recognition of her agency, power and control only came at the moment of being challenged.

Until the time that she challenged me I didn't take responsibility for the fact that I had a choice. I don't think I knew until that moment that actually I had the power, I had the agency, I had control, and she wasn't going to do it for me – it was something I had to do for myself.

In this instance, the discovery of agency was not a good feeling, and it brought no feeling of relief. A

weight of responsibility accompanied her awareness of agency:

I could choose not to be a victim, I could ask for help, I could stop playing games, I could own my vulnerability....and I couldn't do that without owning my own agency.

A key aspect here is her owning of vulnerability. Her habitual response is horribly painful, but it is a known pain. She has survived it time after time. Opening up to vulnerability involves the risk of trying something new, as well as an acceptance that I don't know what that something is or where it will lead. Without agency, there is no possibility of change. With agency comes the possibility of and a push towards trying something new and untested, and this is not a comfortable place to be.

In her moment of realisation that she has the power to choose to do something different, there is the discomfort of being pulled in opposite directions. One part is protesting, "This is all I know!" and at the same time there is a subtle background awareness that I DO know something different.

To let go of this entrenched, very painful, but known position and go with something different requires a leap of faith. There is no guarantee what will be the outcome of a different choice.

There is a choice between using a defence mechanism that was crucifying me, or opening up to – actually it's kind of spiritual in a way – but opening my heart to love.

## Self-anger vs self-compassion

Time and again, as Becca found herself in this recurring process, she only experienced getting cross with herself. She appeared to be cut off from any feelings of compassion, either towards herself, or from another. In the difficult moment of choice, Becca was still not able to feel compassion for herself, but she was aware of her tutor:

She made herself very available for me, with her words....her words and her tone...and that history and the relationship...a LOT of the relationship.

This availability is an aspect of the compassion that supported her leap of faith. When Becca came to the moment of choice, she had never before experienced repair of a rupture, and therefore she didn't believe repair was possible. Repair could be described as the restoring of compassion, where compassion has been interrupted, blocked or damaged, or where it has been deemed unsafe to allow compassion to be felt or acknowledged. Throughout the two years of contact with her tutor, it's as though compassion was held in safe keeping until the time when Becca was able to take it on for herself:

There is a lot of tenderness in remembering how my tutor stuck with me over the years, and helped...that thing that happened on that day become more concrete for me.

The moment when Becca chose to look up out of her shame and connect with her tutor was the first time she had made contact with another from this place of shame. She hadn't believed it was possible before. By looking up and making contact with her tutor, Becca was allowing compassion in for the first time. There was no immediate relief - that came much later. But this was the starting point for her beginning to feel compassion for herself.

Since that moment, the compassion has developed and developed and developed. I'm satisfied. The memory, the remembering is very satisfying.

### *Discussion:*

## Summary, emerging insights

In setting up this research project I intentionally did not specify what a difficult moment in the therapeutic process might be, leaving it open for the participant to find her own meaning. What emerged for Becca was a familiar stuck place, an impasse, where it became possible to change a behaviour for the first time.

The theme of "isolation versus contact" follows on from previous findings of Binder et al (2009, p.252), where 'relationship continuity over a certain time span' was one of the themes arising in response to the question, "What was important in therapy?" In our study, compassion was seen to be held by a compassionate other in those instances when it was not possible to have compassion for the self. In Binder et al (2009, p.253) the emphasis was slightly different, where "the therapist represented hope through those years."

The study by Carey et al (2007, p.179) asked the question "How does psychological change occur?" Their findings indicated that this was both a gradual process as well as a vivid identifiable moment of change. In this study, the moment of choice revealed urgency as well as a feeling of spaciousness. By staying with the spaciousness at the moment of choice, a theme of "interplay of past and present" emerged, bringing some new insights into the temporal nature of the impasse. On the one hand, fixed patterns and habits from the past are easily seen. These stuck places carry a trapped energy which is near the surface, visible, tangible and familiar. On the other hand, a less tangible aspect has also come into awareness – a felt sense that now is the time, there is a possibility of making a different choice.

I was surprised to find that these two completely different qualities both have roots in the past. There is a past which has been captured and fixed in time, in the same way that we capture the past in photographs. But there is also a past which is fluid, and which contains possibility, potential, and life not yet lived. For Becca, the possibility of change came from "a felt-sense in some very deep part of my being, and a very deep part of my history." This submerged knowing has lain dormant and outside of awareness until this moment, when it has become a felt-sense in present time. Stern (2004, p.197) speaks of the possibility of the present moment allowing the influence of the past to be diminished. The findings in this study indicate that the present moment can allow the influence of the *fixed past* to be diminished, making room for the healing potential of the *fluid past* to come into awareness.

Following on from Elliot's finding that client agency may be most apparent when clients confront difficulties in the therapeutic process (2008, p.5), in Becca's case, no change would have been possible without discovering her agency. Discovering her agency was a first step, and it opened up for her an inner power struggle. On one side, her default position of not recognising her agency was painful, but it was a familiar pain, predictable, and therefore safe. On the other side was letting go with a leap of faith into something unknown. A key aspect in being able to take this leap was owning her vulnerability; letting in help and letting in love.

It surprised me that Becca's discovery of agency was not a good feeling, and it brought her no relief. Underneath my surprise was an assumption that getting in touch with our own power brings with it a

welcome freedom, and that change inevitably follows. On reflection, my assumption is part of a widespread world view that is a bit embarrassed by vulnerability; that is more comfortable with the idea of success, power, and a clear winner. In contrast to this duality, Becca was able to see her vulnerability as an aspect of agency, not something at odds with agency. Embracing her vulnerability opened the door to fluidity, allowing something different and unknown to happen.

## Reflexive considerations, strengths and weaknesses

Choosing to interview a fellow trainee meant that we brought our shared history to the project. Becca is someone I like and respect, and though I was aware of us having a similar shame processes, we never discussed this prior to the interview. Having experienced Becca from the outside, I was very interested to hear her story from the inside. During the interview, I got excited about the places where our experiences overlap, and it seemed natural to follow these strands. Sometimes our processes became intertwined and we finished each other's sentences, or a significant word would come from one of us and be expanded upon by the other. I would have welcomed continuing the relational approach through the rest of this project, but Becca was clear that she didn't want to be involved beyond the interview stage.

Looking back on the interview, I think there are areas where we could have dwelled longer. For example, in the analysis stage I found myself curious about and wishing for a deeper description of Becca's kaleidoscope tunnel, or the mutual knowing with her tutor that 'now is the time'. My own interests as well as the time-constraints we were operating under meant that some aspects were focused on and others were excluded from my focus of attention.

Becca's experience of a moment of impasse and potential change was full of ambiguity and paradox, with much happening at once, on different levels of awareness, and by using a phenomenological method it was possible to uncover and describe some of the hidden implicit meaning revealed in this moment. This study has been about depth, rather than breadth of experience, made possible by slowing down and taking time to dwell in wonder, both with the participant and with the data. As a novice researcher, my method of analysis was truly emergent, as I had no previous experience to influence my method. A disadvantage of this was the vast number of hours I have spent on analysis, and I imagine my analysis in future projects will become more efficient, without losing that emergent quality.

In reflexively attending to my own similar, yet different experiences to Becca, I'm increasingly aware that what is unresolved in my own vulnerability and shame will have impacted on this study. As my understanding of her experience deepened, so my understanding of my own experience also deepened. This process is ongoing; as deeper layers are uncovered I become aware that there is more to be revealed, and "However rich and comprehensive, any one analysis is, inevitably, incomplete, partial, tentative, emergent, open, and uncertain" (Finlay, 2008, p.6).

## Conclusion

Becca's journey from self-anger to self-compassion has brought her to a place of satisfaction. In the room around us and between us there is a spacious quality, an absence of any physical stress symp-

toms, and an absence of any strong emotions.

It's just a contentment and a calmness. I'm not feeling overstimulated, I'm not feeling overwhelming joy or excitement, it's just a real gentle feeling.... a real gentle.... comfort. It's got real grounding, it's got solidity, there is a truth around my memory and my feeling that will go forward.

It seems right to end with these words of Becca's. And yet, there is something else. I am aware of a pull in me towards happy endings, and I experience a blur of collected memories of family and friends pulling together in times of victories, successes, and resolutions of difficulties. The magnetic pull towards successful outcomes is a strong one, and an easy natural bonding takes place between us at those times. But if I dig a bit deeper, there is something else beneath the joy of success, which is easily overlooked. I'm sensing something of the unacknowledged value of the shame experience, where shame is not just something to be got rid of, but rather an invitation to look up and allow oneself to see and be seen in vulnerability; to open up to vulnerability by letting in help and letting in love. I see this as an area for further study - the role of vulnerability in bringing fluidity and the possibility of change.