

**‘EMBODIED REFLECTION’
- A PHASE OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL HEURISTIC RESEARCH
A process-oriented study to introduce a method of reflection
centered in the body**

Roberta Legros Štěpánková¹, Ivo Čermák^{1,2}

¹ Department of Psychology, Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University, Brno

² Faculty of Arts and Letters, Catholic University, Ružomberok

robi.stepankova@gmail.com

Abstract: This article aims to shed some light on the importance of embodiment and an embodied attitude towards data analysis, within the framework of a heuristic phenomenological inquiry. It is a process-oriented study, by which the authors want to point out that it is a partial/temporal interception of a larger body of research. It presents embodied reflection (ER), through the original concepts it stems from – embodiment and reflective practices, as a step/phase in the phenomenological analysis of experience. Thus it is proposed to the reader as a systematically described, newly designed tool, which can serve psychologists and psychotherapists in practice, qualitative researchers, or social workers in research and practice, to reach a fuller understanding of the researched/experienced phenomenon. ER is also presented as part of the data analysis procedure in a concrete research inquiry centered in the essence of improvisation in dance and body-oriented psychotherapy contexts. An added value of this tool and/or a contribution to any kind of phenomenological or psychotherapeutic qualitative study is discussed in relation to the existing literature. Some further possible ways of employing this method are proposed

Keywords: embodied reflection, embodiment, improvisation, heuristic phenomenology

INTRODUCTION

Writing needs to breathe and move.

Lamott

The context

This article presents a part of a long-lasting heuristic phenomenological study (spanning from 2018 till 2024) of the experience with improvisation in two contexts: 1/ dance and 2/ psychotherapy*. The aim of the original research is to understand the essence of improvisation as a “way of doing/working” both in dance and psychotherapy that includes the body as a valued source of information and a locus where the process happens.

The aim of this paper is to share a specific method called “Embodied reflection” (ER) especially designed for data analysis in heuristic phenomenological research design proposed by Moustakas

(1990). This procedure is proposed and systematically described by the author as she uses it within the framework of her PhD. research.

We propose that embodied reflection helps the phenomenological researcher to empathize in a deeper and fuller way with the participants of the research and with the data itself. Embodied reflection shows itself as *a way of living and dealing with what wants to be known* in a conscious way, and it includes and acknowledges the knowledge of our moving body.

We would like to briefly introduce three subjects/contexts – improvisation, dance and body-oriented psychotherapy – improvisation being the central phenomenon under study, and the latter two being the contexts/domains in which improvisation is investigated.

IMPROVISATION

Each element is pre-existing, but the way improvisers can combine them
is a unique creation of the present moment.
Coste et al.

Improvisation implies a deep connection
between the personal and the communal, self and world.
Rob Wallace

In psychology, improvisation is typically conceived as a creative process without a script or anticipated preparation (Guegnon et al., 2016 a, b in Coste et al. 2019).

Coste states that improvisation is central in many fields, including performing arts (e.g. music, theatre or dance) and everyday life (e.g. improvising a dinner, a speech or actions in sports), and is conceived to be shaped by the lifetime history of the individuals, especially via their past (bodily) experiences and training (Chaleraiu et al., 2002 in Coste et al., 2019).

Most of the books that have been written about movement improvisation have contained very limited discussion on how it really works (De Spain, p.4, 2014). In fact, there has been almost no qualitative research carried out on the experience of improvisation. We claim that in general, the research in this field is focused on the necessity to either quantify the improvisational products in some way or to measure the neurological processes awakened in improvisation.

Improvisation is an essential part of any creative research process, and according to the anthropologists Elisabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold, even 'the way we work' generally (Cools, 2015). They see three distinctive qualities or characteristics of improvisation: 1) It is generative; 2) It is relational; 3) It is temporal (Cools, 2015).

According to Van Imschoot (1997, p.23 in Cools, 2015) improvisation itself improvises along the way and through different generations of practitioners. Their needs and questions, their seriousness and playfulness, will redefine its content continuously. On the other hand, de Spain (2014, p. 8) dares to confront us with two things that are quickly encountered when engaging in improvisation: the limitlessness of possibilities and the limitations of "self" – your ways of thinking, your style of problem solving, the boundaries of your physicality. He further asks himself creatively: Where does improvisation reside? He answers by saying that it is as much about mind as movement. Improvisation, to him, means coming into contact with the mind of movement and movement of mind (2014, p. 53).

ETYMOLOGICALLY

Improvisation in everyday speech carries a temporal dimension, as in acting "on the spur of the moment" or as in performing "from the materials and sources available without previous planning" ("Improvisation" in *Collins Dictionary*). Meanwhile in art, improvisation is referenced as a special form of artistic production (Douglas, 2012).

From the French language of the 17th century, the verb '*improviser*' meant to "compose or say extemporaneously". From Latin, '*improvisio*' meant "unforeseen, not studied or prepared beforehand," from the assimilated form of *in-* "not, opposite of" + *provisus* "foreseen" (etymological dictionary). From the Italian '*improvvisare*', derived from *improvviso* – "that which happens unexpectedly, with no preparation" (Lippi, 2016).

It is possible to see improvisation as a semi-transparent, multi-staged, multi-leveled process through which we sense, perceive, think and decide in real time (Fischlin & Porter, 2012). Thus, we may see improvisation as a multi-layered process involving many (if not all) of the known basic psychological processes.

We agree deeply with the following stance of the 'Improvisation, Community and Social Practice Institute' that "*Improvisation must be considered not simply as a musical form, but as a complex social phenomenon that mediates transcultural inter-artistic (and inter-disciplinary) exchanges that produce new conceptions of identity, community, history, and the body*" (ICASP, 2017).

Improvisation, due to its spontaneous, immediate and elusive nature, is often seen as an omnipresent activity. While we agree that the technique of (dance) improvisation may be seen as a dynamic set of skills that one may train in order to evolve mastery of improvisation, there are theoreticians that consider improvisation as an action present in our lives. For example, Fischlin and Porter (2016) consider improvisation as a necessary experimentation with the context, but also a specific practice, an awareness of playing the potential and possibility of any moment with the tools at hand. On the other hand, Lippi (2016) affirms that improvisation concerns any human practice that invites us into the (realm of) creation, regardless of the area in question. Engel and Keller (2011) state that despite noteworthy attempts to elucidate the cognitive underpinnings of improvisation, the precise nature of the processes that enable a performer to invent melodic material in real-time remain "shrouded in mystery" (Ashley, 2009 in Engel and Keller, 2011).

BODY ORIENTED PSYCHOTHERAPY & DANCE

The rationale for bringing together two, seemingly qualitatively and formally different contexts - that of body-oriented psychotherapy and dance, is actually very simple. Roberta Legros, one of the authors this paper, is a psychologist and body-oriented psychotherapist at the same time working as a dancer. According to the *inner frame of reference*, one of the basic heuristic research concepts defined by Moustakas (1990), the two experiences – the psychotherapeutic work and dancing – have met inside of herself over the course of fifteen years, and have both been essential parts of her work and practice. In spite of the imagined distance between these domains in our practical life, we notice that there is a tendency in certain groups of personal growth practitioners to incline towards dance, movement and body therapy studies. These two fields resemble and overlap most obviously if one searches for the embodied approach to human and soul, or if a movement practitioner looks for a deeper understanding of the psychological and spiritual layers of the self.

BODY ORIENTED PSYCHOTHERAPY ¹

Rohricht describes Body oriented psychotherapy (BOP) (Rohricht, 2009) as a heterogenous field which presents itself as rather disorganized. In 2009, Rohricht stated that there was not a coherent systematic definition of BOP. Body oriented psychotherapy is an umbrella term for therapies that are oriented on the corporal experience, movement, and dance as expression of one's feeling, and therefore also encompasses dance-movement therapy.

In BOP, therapeutic process spans across the domains of cognitive reconstruction, insight oriented processes and uniquely modulated emotional processing, affect regulation, movement behavior, and bodily self-awareness (Rohricht, 2009).

DANCE MOVEMENT PSYCHOTHERAPY

The mind-body interaction is extremely important in dance/movement therapy.

Pericelous

Dance movement therapy (DMT) as a psychotherapeutic approach was developed from the 1950s simultaneously on both coasts of the United States. The western pioneer was Mary Whitehouse, and on the east it was Marian Chace.

Dance Movement Therapy is the use of expressive movement and dance as a vehicle through which an individual can engage in the process of personal integration and growth. It is founded on the principle that there is a relationship between motion and emotion, and that by exploring a more varied vocabulary of movement, people experience the possibility of becoming more securely balanced yet increasingly spontaneous and adaptable. The dance movement therapist creates a holding environment in which such feelings can be safely expressed, acknowledged and communicated (Payne 1992).

The American Dance Movement Therapy Association (**ADMT**) currently defines dance movement therapy as the psychotherapeutic use of movement to **promote emotional, social, cognitive, and physical integration** of the individual, for the **purpose of improving health and well-being**.

DANCE

As Mackrell (2024) states in her article defining dance as an impulse and artistic expression, dance is a movement of the body in a rhythmic way, usually to music and within a given space, for the purpose of expressing an idea or emotion, releasing energy, or simply taking delight in the movement itself.

Dance is a powerful impulse, but the art of dance is that impulse channeled by skillful performers into something that becomes intensely expressive, and that may delight spectators who feel no wish to dance themselves.

¹ *Note of the author: One of the authors – Roberta Legros Štěpánková – completed a masters degree in Dance Movement Therapy (M DaT) at CODARTS, the University for the Arts in Rotterdam, in 2015. Following from the way her psychotherapeutic practice has been evolving during the past seven years, she describes herself as a „body oriented psychotherapist“, in spite of the qualification reached in „dance movement therapy“. Being a dancer and choreographer and at the same time a psychotherapist, she focuses mainly on the importance of body awareness, consciousness of our bodily experiences, and of movement. Presenting herself as a body oriented psychotherapist, she aims to more precisely explain at first view that her primary instrument in a therapeutic session is not dance, but the moving body.*

EMBODIED REFLECTION THE BODY

I propose a new form of courage of the body: the use of the body not for the development of muscles, but for the cultivation of sensitivity. This will mean the development of the capacity to listen with the body. It will be, as Nietzsche remarked, learning to think with the body. It will be the valuing the body as the means of empathy with others, as expression of the self as a thing of beauty and as a rich source of pleasure.

Rollo May

There is more wisdom in your body than in your deepest philosophy.

Friedrich Nietzsche

The body is an entity which actively rises towards and gets to know its surroundings (Merleau-Ponty 1962 in Rumble 2012). The body as lived is the medium for what existential philosophy refers to as 'being-in-the-world' (Merleau-Ponty 1962 in Rumble 2012). The body discloses the world just as the world discloses itself through the body (Finlay, 2006)

The body is the vehicle of being in the world, as Merleau-Ponty states (1945/62 in Finlay, 2006). He saw the body as a horizon latent in all our experience...and anterior to every determining thought. He proposed the body as the place, the locus through which we understand ourselves and the world.

We learn through the body.

To support this, we might follow Douglas & Coessens (2011), delineating movement as simultaneously continuous and discrete, emerging out of our physiology as bipedal beings capable of moving through time by orientating ourselves in space. This for the authors acts as a metaphor for how we develop knowledge in the world through different levels of expression, translation and trans-mediation.

The body is shaped and shapes itself as the very presence of self, better *the selving of presence*. It is the revelation of self to the other, to itself, an articulation of its being. The original disclosure of self is rooted in bodily expression. The mind and body are not two separate substances, but different articulations of a singleness of being that is itself neither mental nor material (Desmond, 1990, 66).

Merleau-Ponty calls the lived unity of the mind-body-world system "the lived body". The body understood as a lived body is necessarily ambiguous, since it is both material and self-conscious. It is physiological and psychological, but Merleau-Ponty asserts that these terms are not as dichotomous as one would imagine. There is mind in the body and body in the mind (Bullington, 2013). Desmond (1990, 69) considers the body as an abundance of presence, as the appearing of mind in sensuous immediacy, in terms of what we may call functional, aesthetic, and expressive form.

EMBODIMENT

Embodiment is an ongoing process of bringing conscious self-awareness to and about the body (Leigh & Bailey, 2013). It is often synonymized with self-awareness, mindfulness, or sense of embodiment, and it is suggested that it allows the reflective practitioner to be conscious of her own thoughts, the environment in which she finds herself, and the reactions that she has (164, in Leigh & Bailey, 2013).

Lakoff and Johnson present three foundational principles: 1) the mind is inherently embodied, 2) thought is mostly unconscious, 3) abstract concepts are largely metaphorical (in Pahofer & Payne, 2011, p. 218). Knowing does therefore happen in and through the body, in an unconscious or preconscious way, and in a non-linguaged, metaphorical manner (Panhofer and Payne, 2011, p. 219).

Thorburn (2008), as cited in Leigh & Bailey (2013, p. 163), states that “the essence of an experience is its intentionality: the meaning of events, the meaning of embodied action including kinaesthetic awareness of one’s movements, and the importance of sensations as they are experience by the body”.

“Embodied cognition” and the “embodied mind” have recently been proposed by philosophers believing that the nature of the human mind is largely determined by the form of the human body. Gallagher (2005) investigates the influence of the body on self-consciousness, perception, language and social cognition, claiming that the body shapes the mind at a fundamental level, contributing to a prior kind of knowledge which is unavailable to introspective consciousness, a knowledge which remains “behind the scenes” (Gallagher, 2005, p.141).

Damasio calls this knowledge from “behind the scenes” our “nonverbal narrative of knowing” (Damasio, 1999, p 186). This nonverbal narrative creates consciousness that, according to him, is the foundation of consciousness.

The rich sense of embodied experience is the locus of meaning and knowledge.
M. Johnson

Human beings have bodies that are the locus of their complex interactions with their environment thus embodiment has a crucial role in understanding, reasoning and knowing. If knowing is a mode of practical activity, and if the locus of that practice is our embodied being in the world, then *we know* that the world must surely include the patterns of our bodily experience (Johnson, 1989).

METHOD

We are in the world through our body, and the basis of knowledge lies
in the sensorimotor experience, the most intimate mode of knowing.
Ruth Foster

This paper shares an extract of an extended phenomenological study centered in experience with improvisation (as a process and outcome) in two related yet distinct contexts: 1/dance and 2/body oriented psychotherapy. A group of dancers whose practice and performance work essentially centers on improvisation and a group of psychotherapists within the field of body-oriented psychotherapies have been interviewed, and were analysed along with the data originating directly from the experience of the researcher.

The researcher adopted a double role: “me-as-researcher”, initiating and proceeding with the study, and “me-as-participant”, interviewing herself about her own experience with improvisation in both contexts. The researcher then deals with the constant oscillation between the roles and related processes of data-creation, data-analysis and deeper understanding of the essence of experience.

This paper is designed as a presentation of a specific method of analysis called embodied reflection, the potential of which we aim to illuminate in the scope of this article. The details of the

original heuristic phenomenological study are therefore omitted. Due to the methodological richness and volume of the original study, here we aim exclusively to:

1. briefly explain the focus of the original research, especially its methodology, which is less known and applied in our qualitative research context
2. introduce the embodied reflection as a methodological tool while sharing the theoretical underpinnings that give it grounding
3. suggest and propose embodied reflection as part of the analysis of the heuristic phenomenological method through sharing some examples of it in practice

PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH

The source of all activity is quality,
if there was only quantity, everything would be calm.
Josef Nadj

Linda Finlay advocates for research that teaches her something new, and ideally moves her in some way. One of the main purposes the author is striving for with this paper, next to finding out in more detail about the process and essence of the improvisational act, is to provide psychology and psychotherapy with more practice and knowledge concerning the embodied experience of a therapist and researcher, the embodied ways of reflection, and thus proposing the body as one of the main “instruments” we do use and need to use/navigate consciously as we work in research and psychotherapeutic practice.

For me, *phenomenology* has become more than a research methodology.
It is a way of being.
Linda Finlay

The empirical phenomenological approach involves a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions, which provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience. The approach “seeks to disclose and elucidate the phenomena of behavior as they manifest themselves in their perceived immediacy” (van Kaam 1966 in Moustakas 1994, p 13).

The aim of phenomenology is to describe the lived world of everyday experience (Finlay, 2011). Phenomenological research into individual experience gives insight into, and understanding of, the human condition. Sometimes it articulates the things we already know tacitly but have not articulated in depth (Finlay, 2011).

Phenomenological research is potentially transformative for both researcher and participant (or in the case of heuristic phenomenology: for the researcher AS the participant). It offers individuals the opportunity to be witnessed in their experience and allows them to “give voice” to what they are going through. It also opens new possibilities for the researcher and researched to make sense of the experience in focus (Finlay, 2011).

Phenomenological research aims to capture lived experience by connecting to it immediately (Finlay, 2011). The immediacy is inherent to the improvisational attitude and in fact to the natural bodily being – where the immediacy is embedded in its flesh and tissue and an always present condition of being-in the world and in/with itself.

Finlay (2011) proposed a list of 6 facets that every phenomenological project should include, which we consider as significant in grasping the essence of what it means to elaborate phenomenological science. Subsequently, we will discuss only some of the facets in more detail.

- 1/ A focus on **lived experience and meanings**
- 2/ The use of **rigorous, rich and resonant description**
- 3/ A concern with **existential issues**
- 4/ The assumption that **body and world are intertwined**
- 5/ The application of the **“phenomenological attitude”**
- 6/ A potentially **transformative relational approach**

The assumption that **body and world are intertwined** captures the essence of the presented procedure’s focus. The paper endeavors to shed more light on the embodied experience of improvisation itself - through the *interviews*, where the participants reflect verbally about the meaning of improvisation, and in an *embodied reflection*, which is a method of movement reflection followed by verbal reflection conducted by the researcher herself, in order to channel qualitatively different data clarifying the improvisational nature of being/inter-acting in dance making and psychotherapy.

HEURISTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY (Moustakas, 1990)

Heuristic research came into my life when I was searching for a word that would meaningfully encompass the process that I believed to be essential in investigations of human experience.
Clark Moustakas

Heuristic phenomenological inquiry is a reflexive version of descriptive phenomenology that diverges from the empirical, descriptive attitude in its implicit hermeneutic shift and focus on researcher self-search and transformation (Finlay, 2011). Heuristic research is a way of engaging in scientific search using processes aimed at discovery through dialogue and self-inquiry to find underlying meanings of experience (Finlay, 2009, p. 163). The reason we briefly present this method is to provide the reader with a framework and paradigm of the original study. The phases of a heuristic phenomenological research were designed by Moustakas (1990) as follows (Table 1).

Table 1 Phases of heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990)

| | | |
|----|---------------------------|---|
| 1. | initial engagement | wakening an intense interest and passion in the research subject/phenomenon |
| 2. | immersion | the researcher begins to live, sleep, breath the research question to intimately appreciate its effects |
| 3. | incubation | engaging intuition awaiting tacit knowing to percolate to consciousness |
| 4. | illumination | reviewing all the data in order to identify implicit, essential meanings |
| 5. | explication | familiarizing oneself more deeply with the data, unfolding the layers of the meanings and pulling the key themes together |
| 6. | creative synthesis | forming a depiction of the findings through a creative, artistic process towards a work of art |

EMBODIED REFLECTION

There is a resonance between embodied self-awareness and phenomenology.
Leigh & Bailey

The reason why we present and put emphasis on the potential of embodied reflection is that far too often the researcher's presence – let alone their bodily presence – is sanitized out of research accounts (Burn, 2002 in Finlay, 2006). Through her own experience, the author has recognized the potential of the body as a source of information in the process of understanding the own self and the other. It is through the lived body (Merleau-Ponty, 1908-1961 in Bullington, 2013) that we are in the world and the world is in us, thus only by involving the body as an essential aspect in the process of knowing and understanding, can we reach the essence of experience more comprehensively.

Finlay (2006), a phenomenological researcher advocating the role of the researcher's bodily experience, states: *"If embodiment is a pervasive fundamental presence in the lifeworld, it surely behoves phenomenological researchers to engage with it in a serious and sustained way"*.

To take embodiment seriously is to take seriously how one speaks and how one listens to self and other ... being an involved researcher – an observer that is being affected by and is affecting what is taking place. Being a researcher requires that one becomes fully and thoughtfully involved, as if one is being engaged in a dance of moving forward and back as an embodied being (Halling and Goldfarb, 1991 in Finlay, 2006).

Embodied reflection as a methodological tool

Embodied reflection (further ER) is a way of reflecting on our experience and even on the experience of others, by looking into bodily experiences. We propose it as a systematic and - to the human being - natural way of "thinking through the moving body" about the meanings of our experience. As Smears (2009 in Leigh & Bailey, 2013, p. 164) states, embodiment and embodied awareness can be an integral part of a reflective process.

Stella and Taggart (2020) write about the phenomenologically-based embodied reflection as a reflection strategy of recalling a memory of a (supervision) session, while reflecting on how that experience felt in the body, exploring the sensations, emotions, images, and feelings.

Based on their research, they state that the embodied reflective process results in a direct, unmediated, and visceral knowing of the other, eventually affording both client and analyst a way to further recognize and understand the dissociated self-narratives and relational patterns, and integrate them into a more reflective and cohesive self (Stella and Taggart, 2020).

ER is neither mystical nor exclusively experienced by artists or experts. Camille Buttingsrud (2015) believes that „we all have the capacity to reflect emotionally and bodily; it is the universal human experience of being profoundly focused through the non-conceptual aspect of the self. *"We agree with this, and add that we might have lost, mainly due to the development of technology in recent decades, the trust in listening to our own subtle bodily signals. There is now the opportunity to regain it by conscious practice."*

One of the aims of focusing on the ER as a methodological tool is its potential, when executed in a disciplined, conscious and systematic way, to capture the "un-thought" or pre-reflective information that is present in the layers of the body, but is not yet present in the consciousness of the researcher. This part of our experience is often even pre-verbal. This procedure is designed to support and deepen the researcher's ability to pay attention to the embodied level of awareness,

and grasp these physiological events first through experience of them (sensations, feelings, corporeal images,...), and then in words, on the lexical level.

Buttingsrud (2015) designates this the *embodied reflective self-consciousness*; a reflective process experienced through and with the embodied and emotional self. To her, this self-consciousness seems to have its own distinct structure that is not reducible to reflectivity and pre-reflectivity.

Although ER is quite often mentioned by phenomenological and arts-based researchers, it usually stays on the theoretical plane. Hereby, based on the aforementioned concepts, we aim to describe it systematically as we have designed it and also share some concrete examples from the process of applying it.

The process of ER as we employ it has the following steps:

1. **Contacting:** We employ ER *right after the lived experience with the phenomenon or with the data* (in our case after having contacted the data/text describing the experience with improvisation in a psychotherapist and dancer)
2. **Responding:** The researcher allows their body to *respond* to the experience in an environment of tranquility and safety. *Responding* can happen by moving or staying still while imagining movement and/or noticing any sensations, inner movements, feelings or images. (The time for this phase can eventually be set by an alarm clock, which may bring the clarity of a time frame to the researcher. We often like to work in a time frame of 3 minutes.)
3. **Transposing:** The last step is to transpose the movement and/or bodily experience onto a verbal level by writing, as concretely as stays in the memory of the mover, what happened, what was perceived, what was felt or imagined, or simply what movements were initiated. *In writing, we invite the mover to stay with the essence of the movement experience.*

The step of transposing the movement/bodily material onto a lexical level can have crucial repercussions as to what information is gained. Therefore, we would like to place emphasis on the following points:

- **being simple and precise** in writing. Try to avoid writing too much unnecessary text, but rather stick to the essence of the experience and use just the amount of text you need.

- **allowing oneself to "tune back"** into the movement experience if you need it, or feel you have forgotten it. You can re-live a movement or revisit a position in order to come closer to the experience.

- **keeping a clear time frame** for the movement and also writing phases can be very useful. We advise keeping it under 5 minutes, otherwise, there is an abundance of information that is difficult to track.

„SHARING THE PROCESS“

In phenomenological research, the process is often more important than the findings or the outcomes. The process of understanding, of getting closer to the essence of the phenomenon, has a specific vibration that cannot be overlooked by seeing only the outcomes of the phenomenological study. Therefore, we decided to share some excerpts from the analysis process and from the embodied reflection in the following table (Table 2, 3) with some comments ensuing from the practice.

We invite the reader to approach these excerpts imagining:

- 1/ the original interview was conducted between the researcher, who is a dancer and body oriented psychotherapist, and A/ a dancer + B/ a psychotherapist
- 2/ the reflective process on both levels is conducted by the researcher

3/ the main intention is to understand the essence of the experience with improvisation in the context of A/ dance and B/ psychotherapy.

Table 2 Embodied reflection in the process of analysis of the dancer’s experience with improvisation

| (A) Excerpts from an interview with a dancer | Researcher’s reflections Level I. | Embodied reflection Level II. |
|---|--|--|
| <i>“I love living my life following my nose, following life as it asks me to...”</i> | Living life following our nose... what a freedom and having contact with that...actually there is a lot of responsibility in the listening, in knowing that now I am listening, and now I am available to follow any change, the change can happen at any moment...the flow of life. | I feel a relief. There is nothing – no inner information - that I need to recall, remember, hold onto in mind, all that I can listen to and follow is HERE – if I open my senses. There is an infinite ease, freedom in a sense of no need to hold onto anything, retain anything, but be guided by the now into my next movement or stillness. |
| <i>“I feel that I dedicate my life to improvisation. Or improvisation invites me to live in a certain way that I feel alive, again....”</i> | She dedicates her life to improvisation. Do I? How do I do that? ...I feel it in her work and being, I recognize it, from how I have been following and knowing her for the last 10 years. It feels like once we fall in love with improvisation, it asks everything, the whole life dedication or it is everywhere. | ... this kind of a sensation, a soft recollection of my subtle energetic (?) body into a vertically flowing inner motion. It is a soft, fluid and straight...of a straight direction down-upwards...it feels slightly upwards pulling... It also makes my hand move in front of the torso, up and down, sliding. I don t need to understand, to sense is enough here. It gives a sense of a simple orientation, attunement and slight flow. |
| <i>“that aliveness and alertness are crucial to me...It asks the most of me it’s very demanding but in the way that I love it. So I have to be very present. And get out of the way.”</i> | H6/I feel as if there was a contradiction in this: to BE PRESENT and at the same time GET OUT OF THE WAY. / I need to let go of my own wishes..be present for „what needs to be done“. It feels like letting something higher intervene – but of course it is me fully, as well. – it is almost a spiritual practice in this sense...? | I move. And I realize that it has to do with dropping something, dropping my usual, everyday life self-actions, attitudes... it is letting go of my “normal” (habitual) ways of moving, being ready and open to being moved in a new way,.. |

Table 3 Embodied reflection in the process of analysis of the psychotherapist's experience with improvisation

| (B) Excerpts from an interview with a psychotherapist | Researcher's reflections Level I. | Embodied reflection Level II. |
|--|--|---|
| <p><i>"it's something like letting myself be guided, in my work or even in my life, by something...something deeper than just my ideas that come from my mind...."</i></p> | <p>I recognized that feeling that „something is guiding me“, and this something is equally of the inner and the outer space, it cannot be separate or clearly known where it comes from.</p> <p>She also says that she does that at work but/and also in life, suggesting that this improvisational process is adopted in both contexts.</p> | <p>...it is about being moved rather than moving...). I wait for a move and then I am moved. I try to recognize where this impulse is coming from. ...but actually I cannot know whether it is not coming from the outside space too...? Or from the energetic layers of the body... most probably both.</p> <p>...I know every single movement I am doing and it is concrete, but the place where it is coming from is not so clear...maybe a deeper body memory saved in every single cell and how it coordinates together?</p> <p>one other thing appears... sometimes I feel a pull in the body, an image of a form that pulls me to make that move...is this the body imagining all the time its moves?</p> |
| <p><i>"some kind of inspiration - that I know that this is the way to go, this is the way to go, this is the way to go and it's right and I don't have to justify it very much."</i></p> | <p>She suggests that inspiration is a certain kind of knowledge, as if inspiration was knowing a direction. This is very similar to intuition. Almost as if inspiration was a fruit of intuition...hmmm maybe i am just trying to get things clear from a theoretical point of view?</p> | <p>....I just lay down and see what happens when I focus on this one – the inspiration coming as a direction - 1/I am constantly being informed – direction, possible movement,..., 2/the information depends on what thing is in the foreground of my attention (if a back, the move wants to go back, if face, the move is in-formed by the sensation in the face, etc...), 3/it is happening very quickly – I had many signals in 2</p> |

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| | | minutes of laying, I did not move all of them. |
| <i>“there’s such a flow, such a flow in that there’s nothing stopping me.”</i> | It sounds familiar...it is going... there is not much tension, the paths/channels are open, and we can be going/doing/proceeding....further | ...immediately, I realize there is breath moving, flowing in and out even when I am still . And also, the flow is a dance for me actually, it is constant movement of the body in space but also a movement inside of the body , breath or sensations navigating through the body as the blood in the veins or liquids of the body constantly moving... |

Some reflections on embodied reflection

Embodied reflection contributes to the original data with a new perspective. Having the information pass through the body, we reach qualitatively new kinds of information and thus understanding, even though it is finally presented in text. Nevertheless, it awakens new layers of our attention and awareness. Also, it propels the inclusiveness and proactive nature of the researcher’s experience. Even though the information coming from embodied reflection may be surprising and at first glance distant from the original data, it has (energetic) resonances with the original data, and echoes them on a qualitatively different level through our whole proactive being. Now, there is an opportunity to use our whole body, not separate from our minds, as reflective instruments/tools. As Merleau-Ponty believes, the body is in a constant dialogue with the world. Lastly, embodied reflection enables us to elaborate further on something we have resonated with in the original data, and therefore facilitates the hermeneutic spiraling in a more complex way.

Rennie and Fergus (2006) claim, combining the concepts and actualities of embodiment and phenomenology, that any further engagement in the hermeneutic circle, or the interpretation of part of the text in terms of the meaning of the whole of the text, is a progressive circling of understanding and may lead to broadening the comprehensiveness of the articulated understanding once symbolized (worded). They further argue that embodied categorization is an approach to interpretation in which subjectivity is drawn on productively. It begins by interpreting text as openly as possible, to facilitate receptivity to its nuances of meaning. While attempting to understand the text, the analyst feels its meaning in their body. This embodiment is accompanied by memories, images, associations, and words phrases that form a reservoir into which the analyst dips.

DISCUSSION

We know more than we can tell.
M. Polanyi

The situation as experienced is embodied as a *felt sense*, that is, “feelings as felt complexity”. In embodied reflection, we activate what Gendlin described as *felt sense* of the situation. The given felt meaning acts as arbiter of the symbols (words) we use (Gendlin, 1973 in Rennie & Fergus, 2006).

In the hermeneutic process of approaching deeper understanding of the essence of the studied phenomenon, the interpreter is engaged in *Verstehen*, or the activity of understanding. The interpreter works back and forth between how the given concept seems to fit with their own experience of the phenomenon, and the sense of its fit with the participant's account of the experience of it (Rennie & Fergus, 2006). For this, we need to take into account that this process of gaining knowledge is experiential, it is happening through our whole being, and not exclusively in our (thinking) minds. As Leigh and Bailey (2013) state, embodiment is an on-going process of bringing conscious self-awareness to and about the body, which is the main focus of embodied reflection.

Important research has been done about imagination as a way of knowing, and therefore as a function of the whole dynamic and proactive organism. Shaul's (1994) findings on the relationship between the activation of our imagination as a bodily process have reverberations and consequences to our sense of hearing the other and being heard. Shaul (1994 in Rennie and Fergus, 2006) found that clients felt more understood immediately after their therapists had experienced imagery about what their clients said, whether the therapists had disclosed the imagery or not, and thus concluded that the imagery acts as an empathic lens. When therapists (and researchers) focus on their imagery, it helps them to see (understand) the other person's experience more clearly (Rennie & Fergus, 2006, p.16). This study directly advocates for the place of embodied reflection in a deeper and fuller understanding of the experiential data. Furthermore, it suggests a direct relationship between imagining, which is a whole body process, and empathy and intersubjective understanding.

Attention to embodied experience when conceptualizing the meanings of passages of text can result in imaginative, abstract meanings, that go to the heart of the phenomenon under study (Rennie & Fergus 2006, p. 16).

We became aware of the meanings hidden in the participant's outspoken experience in a powerful and radically enriched way through embodied reflection, through moving from the written, moving from the symbolic into the concrete reality of the body. This may be supported by Finlay's repeated advocating for the embodied presence of the researcher to the participant and to the data. She holds that, being able to tune into the movement of the other, she can understand their experience. Through Toombs (1993 in Finlay, 2006) she continues affirming that listening well involves close observation of the other's embodied presence, and based on that we dare to claim that there is no reason why this process would not work similarly for our own embodied presence and experience of understanding. Rather than inferring, this embodied understanding involves experiencing the whole (Finlay, 2006).

Finlay, as a recognized embodied phenomenological researcher, emphasizes in various places the importance of noticing the participants' bodily movements and expressions. She also brings focus to the embodied self-awareness of the researcher as probing our own embodied responses as researchers, and she claims that even though at risk, it can open up rich understanding (Finlay, 2006).

This paper aims to emphasize the need for us as (phenomenological) researchers to notice our own embodied situation and demeanor (our sensations, feeling, our movements or movement tendencies...) when relating to the other (participant) and to the data. We constantly perceive and communicate in such an embodied way anyway, on a subconscious level. However, bringing this sensual and bodied level of being and perceiving into our awareness has a potential to understand in new and more complex way and thus make us "a holistically reflective researcher".

Within the concept of reflective embodied empathy, Finlay (2006) suggests that an intersubjective corporeal commonality, or in other words the common sense of being a “lived” body with other bodies and the world, enables that kind of empathy which enables both understanding of the other and self-understanding. Then we could speak about empathy to the other and to oneself is a deeper embodied understanding of the flow of experience in the intersubjective field.

Merleau-Ponty (1964/68 in Finlay, 2006) describes the intertwining of the body and the world as two sides, as a reflection of each other. He asserts that the experience of my own body (researcher) and the experience of the other (researched) are themselves the two sides of one same Being.

As Finlay (2013:5) states, describing the phenomenological attitude of the Lifeworld approach, here the embodied reflection proposes adopting an “open discovering way of being” and developing the “capacity to be surprised and sensitive to the unpredicted and unexpected” (Finlay, 2013:5).

In terms of the practical application of the method of embodied empathy, there is support in Panhofer and Payne (2011), who concluded that shifting from writing to moving and back to writing highlighted how the embodied experience often reduces the embodied word. We resonate with the fact that not all bodily sensations can be transcribed onto the lexical level. Putting the embodied experience into words seems to have its limitations, since so much more seems to be stored in the body which cannot be worded at all. On the other hand, Antilla (2003) affirms that verbal translation allows for an extended consciousness and the expansion of the autobiographical self.

Based on their study about wording the embodied experience, Panhofer & Payne (2011) state that some possible ways of communicating the embodied experience may be through specific ways of using the words: metaphors, images, poetry. They emphasize that non-linguistic ways of knowing need to be emphasized and taken into account. Equally, Rennie and Fergus (2006) agree that attention to embodied experience when conceptualizing the meaning of passages of text can result in imaginative, abstract categories that go to the heart of the phenomenon under study.

Neuro-scientifically, it has been established that through phenomenologically-based embodied reflections, integration of sub-cortical features occurs by shifting attention between sensations and emotions, images or movements. Then, connections with higher cortical processes take place, by understanding relationship patterns, integrating hidden parts, and birthing a more vibrant sense of self (Stanley 2016 in Stella and Taggart, 2020).

CONCLUSION

In much phenomenological research, the focus is on words from transcripts and protocols – the body is strangely absent (Finlay, 2006). In her consistent and expanding body of research, Finlay has been claiming the importance for the researchers to attend reflexively to the expressive bodies of both participant and researcher in order to gain an enriched phenomenological account of the researched.

In Douglas and Coessens (2011), we are familiarized with the artistic way of knowing, which in this context very much resembles the embodied way of knowing in the attitude of the one who gains the knowledge. Being momentarily destabilized by the wonder, the knower reenters knowledge in a deeper way, by actively coordinating responses, physical, mental, and emotional, to incoming impulses. Just like when we read the text grasping the experience of a participant and then let ourselves be moved by it, we let physical responses resound through the active vessel of our “thinking body”. The artist embodies those impulses in the development of new actions that are judged to be right in the moment (in Douglas and Coessens, 2011).

Our initial aim was to share with the reader the theoretical underpinnings of the presented concept - embodied reflection. We could further evolve our experience-based knowledge of ER as a potential way of understanding others' through our own experience, as our own being and subjectivity in the shared bodily commonality is the utmost instrument of understanding the world. As the heuristic phenomenological method proposes, especially through our own experience with a phenomenon we can more comprehensively understand others' experience with it. Herewith, we propose an analysis enriched by embodied understanding to the essence.

Embodied reflection in heuristic phenomenology as a bridge between analysis and creative synthesis

Furthermore, we have found out that embodied reflection serves within the heuristic phenomenological research process as a bridge between the systematic analysis, comprising the reflections, explication and illumination (Moustakas, 1990) and more free and spontaneous creative synthesis, which the creator of this method considered to be Clark Moustakas (1990), as the climax of the analysis.

Once the researcher has mastered knowledge of the material that illuminates and explains the question, the researcher is challenged to put the components and core themes into creative synthesis (Moustakas, 1990). Creative synthesis is carrying out a creative act, which means an opportunity to embody the experience and let it be more freely formed by attending to the pre-expressive, intuitive, tacit streams (Štěpánková, 2015).

I have sought to find a way to give voice to bodily experience.
How might I listen to body's language and listen to its innate wisdom?
Linda Finlay

Embodied reflection in other contexts

We have come to realize the potential of embodied reflection for reflective practitioners such as psychologists, psychotherapists, or social workers, outside the framework of the heuristic phenomenological approach. Anybody who feels the need to understand the process that is happening in the intersubjective fields they are involved in, can employ, playfully or seriously, a reflection including their own body. Listening to their own body and to what it has to say is a significant step towards a deeper awareness and acceptance of the occurring process.

Now, it is important to confess that the extent of practice, working with one's own body and listening to one's own body, plays a role in this. However, we all already have experience with our own bodies. Therefore, if we become silent (Kiara, 2024) in order to begin listening to our bodies in relation to concrete elements of the process at hand, and with the best intention, which is "to hear" or "to understand", we may notice the valuable information that *is already present here and now*. In every moment, this carries the potential to transmit new knowledge, and may slightly or radically change the perspective applied until now in relation to the lived world.

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