

# The Meaning of Understanding and the Open Body

Some implications for qualitative research

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### Abstract

This paper wishes to address the nature of embodied understanding and how such considerations may clarify the purpose and path of phenomenologically-oriented qualitative research. It proceeds by developing some foundational thoughts about what is involved in the kind of understanding that is experientially and qualitatively relevant. As such, particular themes from Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer are lifted out before gathering these themes to settle on the work of Eugene Gendlin. The paper concludes with a consideration of how such an emphasis on embodied understanding may re-interpret the tasks of phenomenologically-oriented qualitative research.

### Key words

Phenomenological inquiry, embodiment, understanding, Gendlin, experiencing, language, focusing, qualitative research.

### Introduction

I would like to develop some thoughts on the question of 'what it means to understand' as an important guiding principle for qualitative research. I believe that addressing this question can tell us important things about the purpose and aims of qualitative research and that it can also help to refine our methodological sensitivity and procedures. In this pursuit, I am indebted to the broad tradition of phenomenology and, specifically, particular strands of thought that run through Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty. I use these great thinkers inspirationally as a psychologically-oriented person with a pragmatic interest in qualitative research. And in this concern to meditate on the theme of what it means to understand, I then move to an emphasis on embodiment as a remedy to a Cartesian tradition that may have overemphasised the 'cognitive' and the abstract dimensions of understanding. Here, the relationship between experience and language becomes a pivotal inquiry. This task is helped centrally by the work of Eugene Gendlin and I spend time unfolding some of his key thoughts on the matter as well as some possible implications of

this for the practice of qualitative research. In this regard, I draw generously on his passion to show how we use much more than our thoughts when we think and how the lived body is full of fertile excess, intimate with crossings and bridges, textures and relationships that are the 'stuff' of understanding.

## Home

A theme found in Husserl relating to understanding is that of the notion of a 'home-world' which makes understanding relevant. In a book called *Home and Beyond*, Anthony Steinbock (1995) considers the theme of home in Husserl's writings as the place from where understanding begins and the place to which understanding returns.

Steinbock interprets Husserl to forge a 'journey' of understanding in which there is a tension between 'home-world' and 'alien-world' - the familiar and the unfamiliar. These two structures define one another, and even the feelings of 'normal' and 'abnormal'. One could even say that where there is only 'home' there is little need to understand. But in this view, neither home-world nor alien-world can be regarded as the 'original sphere' since, in Steinbock's (1995) words, they are 'in a continual historical becoming as delimited from one another. This is the sense in which home and alien are co-generative' (p.179).

Grounding the notion of 'what it means to understand' in the liminal space and experience of 'home' and 'alien', it can become meaningful to talk of understanding as a journey of appropriation and transgression - an interplay of the familiar and the unfamiliar. If it were possible to only have the 'unfamiliar', there would just be wordless shock or even non-recognition. If it were possible to only have the 'familiar' then there would be wordless symbiosis, an eternal womb where understanding is unnecessary.

So, there appears already in Husserl an ontological wound which generates a hunger for understanding - of how to appropriate that which has already transgressed home. Appropriation and transgression may thus be one important aesthetic touchstone for the task of understanding. Steinbock quotes a very illustrative conversation between a Mongol emperor and Marco Polo from a novel by Calvino, which although fiction, highlights 'home' as a crucial aesthetic touchstone:

*'There is still one of which you never speak.'*

*Marco Polo bowed his head.*

*'Venice', the Khan said.*

*Marco smiled. 'What else do you believe I have been talking to you about?'*

*The emperor did not turn a hair. 'And yet I have never heard you mention that name.'*

*And Polo said: 'Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice.'*

*'When I ask you about other cities, I want to hear about them. And about Venice, when I ask you about Venice.'*

*'To distinguish the other cities' qualities, I must speak of a first city that remains implicit. For me it is Venice.'*

*'You should then begin each tale of your travels from the departure, describing Venice as it is, all of it, not omitting anything you remember of it.'*

(Calvino in Steinbock, 1995, p.186)

Implicit in all this is how a home-world is also a we-world - it is intersubjectively co-constituted. And thus, the shared world of culture and language shows itself as a central feature in the drama of understanding and how this occurs through the productive tension between appropriation and transgression. Another word for 'being at home' is to 'dwell'. Bernd Jager (2001) has written that 'only a creature that knows how to dwell can paint, dance, think and write' (p.134). He is indicating how an experience of dwelling can provide the kind of space and boundaries that are required to humanise our world - to create a space of human habitation in which we can 'appropriate' and make that which is given to us our own. There are even writers who see an excessive transgression of 'home' as constituting disease and illness: 'Illness is a state of disharmony, dis-equilibrium, disability, and dis-ease which incorporates a loss of the familiar world' (Toombs, 1993, p.96).

For Husserl, to understand is to imagine, to transgress the concrete event, and enter into the horizons of the world and to find its unities for back home. Here, the meaning of an event is partially constituted by the depth of the world with which one engages - the lifeworld itself speaks and Husserl was most concerned with our mode of access to the e-venting of the lifeworld. But we must leave Husserl for now, as we think further about role of language as bridge-maker in understanding.

## **Adventure**

The emphasis on home-making brings out the task of understanding as a cultural quest full of symbolisation and language. Language is the place where alien otherness becomes adventure, so I would like to move here from Husserl's structure of home/alien to a perspective that is more in the spirit of Heidegger; that of home and adventure. In adventure one is both excited and scared to enter the unknown - one is widened and stands in wonder. At its edge is our own finitude - of giving up what we have

embodied. One is called by otherness and difference to respond as faithfully as possible - to honour the possibilities that stand out and to care for the possibilities of phenomena in an attitude of letting-be-ness. The one from home is transformed by this adventure, as such a 'self' is never self-enclosed but always in the openness of relationships. But in adventures of understanding there is not only otherness, as if home is dead. Home is transformed and adventures become meaningful for home. Understanding is bridge-making and adventure gives the perspective of distance which refreshes home-coming with people there eager for stories and dwellings with open windows and doors - a mixing of interpenetrating worlds. The distance-making power of critique gives understanding the possibility of continual renewal - of making the fruits of understanding relevant in a changing world.

Here we come to Gadamer who can tell us a little more about the play of home and adventure and the role of language in understanding. Gadamer acknowledges Schleiermacher and Dilthey for focusing on the question of 'what it means to understand' and how this could form a core guiding principle for the humanities. He also acknowledges Heidegger for seeing 'understanding' as definitive of the kind of being that is human being. For Gadamer, understanding is the linguistic happening of tradition (Gadamer, 1975) but the happening is such that it exceeds tradition. And so, in a way, home is the past and all that it brings in body, community and meaning. But understanding is also beyond tradition as living event in the way it gathers up the past and lives it forward. In understanding, there is a linguistic reworking of 'home' that arises out of the intersection of this 'carried past' with already adventuring human existence. The aliveness of human living is already exceeding home, so understanding is also an 'exceeding'. The structure, 'adventure' is thus not just elsewhere but is intimately 'in' the ongoing, carried forward 'aliveness' of being human. So for Gadamer, understanding is a linguistic happening in which the play of tradition and ongoing living become interrelated and full of meaning and significance for further living. Understanding is thus not separate from application; it is already telling us what is possible in terms of further living. In this applied sense, understanding is thus a 'living forward'. The way Gadamer puts this is that to understand is to understand differently. Like 'home', tradition has a claim on us, and we are also already claimed by the ongoing living towards the future and new contexts that exceed us. We are thus transformed by this intersection of claims, of the old and the new, and how this intersection comes to us as meaning. To quote Gadamer: 'Understanding is not to be considered so much as an action of subjectivity, but rather as entering into an occurrence of transmission (Überlieferungsgeschehen) in which past and present are being constantly mediated' (Gadamer, 1975, p.290). Understanding is then properly thought

of as neither objective or subjective; it is participatory and cannot be possessed. For Gadamer, the individual is de-throned and understanding is the happening of Being in the locus of human historical existence (Ferrer, 2002).

So the 'happening' of understanding that is beyond where we were standing is a 'standing under' and is a transformation of who we were. Both tradition and ourselves are transformed by such a new meaningful event. In being faithful to such happenings Gadamer speaks of a receptive stance of 'opening' and 'allowing', rather than an active methodological stance of subjecting meanings to procedures. The play of home and adventure is primary - home horizon is expanded and the home/adventure play is a 'between' that is an ongoing productive conversation with no clear endpoints or paths known in advance. Such play does its work beyond all method and is already a linguistic happening before our conscious participation in it.

What does this play of home and adventure tell us about the nature of the kind of language that is the medium and messenger of such living understanding-happening? There appears to be a certain illusiveness of language in which it 'effaces itself in favour of its subject matter' (Kisiel, 1985, p.12). Its power is that it is flexible enough to bend itself to the play and intersection of what is between home and adventure, the old and the new, tradition and living forward. It takes on new meanings in different contexts, and works creatively 'in the cracks', not just logically, but metaphorically, poetically and evocatively. It touches experience and bows down to the excesses of the lifeworld which always exceeds language's precise capture. Yet experience is already languaged and so language reveals its transmitting power. It is there in tradition and in culture before us. But even then it is speculative and always hungry, seeking, like a vampire for the alive blood of experiential happenings. Without it, home and adventure would have no storying power, no bridges, no way to move. So languaging is the angel of the between. And understanding is 'refreshed' language and a real happening of pregnant horizons.

### **The 'said' and the 'unsaid'**

Here, I need to say a few more words about Heidegger and how, in my view, he was more radical than Gadamer. This is arguable but some commentators have said that Gadamer refers to language as a process of making oneself at home in the world (see Kisiel, 1985). For example, Gadamer has emphasised the importance of holding on to home as follows: 'In order to understand that [the text], he must not seek to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutical situation. He must relate the text to this situation, if he wants to understand at all' (Gadamer, 1975 p.289).

If so, one may see this as a somewhat domesticising bias in the interplay of home and adventure. My need to say a few words about Heidegger comes from my sense of how he at times, stood in the mystery of Being, the extent to which self was open rather than home-concerned, and the extent to which he grounded the 'said' in the 'unsaid' - of how being-in-the-world always transcended its forms and intrinsically exceeded linguistic capture. So there is insight in understanding that sees through language to the excesses of living and being-in-the-world. The 'said' points to the 'unsaid': 'what is sayable receives its determination from what is not sayable' (Heidegger, 1975, p.78). There is a mysterious happening in which one is addressed meaningfully by Being, and there is an 'upsurge of the unsaid into the said' (Kissiel, 1985, p.22). Such penetration from the unsaid emphasises the quality of 'adventure'.

Although obviously interested in the phenomenon of understanding, Heidegger grounds understanding in Being that is beyond understanding - Being that presents itself most intimately in living even before it gives itself to understanding. That Being can show itself and be understood means that it can show itself and that such showing itself is a presentation that is linguistic in its broadest sense. Merleau-Ponty captured this sense well when he said that the 'lived' is greater than the 'known'. For Heidegger, there is a mysterious relation between language and Being, in which the 'unsaid' lives always exceedingly as that which the said is about. Speech in a broad sense is pregnant with this excess.

Human being's participation in the 'unsaid' indicates something of the flavour of the radical openness and continuity of self with the world. Self is 'out there' (being-in-the-world) and disappears into a depth of meaningful happenings that are not separate from its being. It is a knowing by virtue of being, an intimate inhabiting, an 'embodying of the presence of things that is pregnant with meaning' (Ferrer, 2002, p.122). But being-in-the-world not only disappears into the 'unsaid' of world-happening, intimate with excess, it also appears again in a historical gathering of what this means for living forward with others in situations. So there appears to be a rhythm of self/world understanding, of self standing in unknowing, and self appropriating the fruits of such unknowing in some meaningful way. Heidegger is indicating a radical intimacy with being-ongoing, a primary adventure before appropriation. What this emphasis means for the destiny of understanding is that Heidegger is always very respectful of the 'forest' and the 'wild' (metaphorically speaking) and how the 'clearing' in the forest is very tentative and can never be fully domesticated. The enacting self as the shape of understanding is first 'wet through' by the insight of intimate participation and this can come to language in tentative ways.

So I interpret a more radical emphasis in Heidegger than Gadamer, in that understanding is always pointing quite strongly to the flow of the

unsaid and its overwhelming adventurous power. Understanding comes into being through 'visiting', even through 'suffering', the unsaid. The insights that come from such adventure transforms us and we are challenged with the question of whether we can come to feel 'at home' with such letting-be-ness of the intimate excesses of what comes. It is in this emphasis of not reducing Being to a domestic home that we come to the notion of embodiment as the messenger of the 'unsaid'. This forges a productive tension between language and the life-world, a productive tension to which the lived body and all its connections are adequate in intersecting the 'said' and the 'unsaid'. And here we move to embodiment as a focal theme and to the work of Eugene Gendlin as a helpful guide.

### **Experiencing, embodiment and language**

Gendlin goes back to Husserl on the topic of experiencing as relational, to Gadamer on the topic of understanding as 'carrying forward', and to Heidegger on the topic of the productive tension of the concealed and the revealed. Let us approach thinking about embodiment first in a holistic and poetic manner. The body is the 'shepherd' of participation; it is in a relationship of belonging to being-in-the-world. It is interwoven with many realms, the perceptual-textural, the languaged, the affective, the immediately responsive, the interpersonal, the temporal, and even the 'unsaid' interweaving of all this together. It is thus not an object, although it can include this, but is rather 'dispersed throughout its lived context' (Merleau-Ponty, 1963, p.248).

When we think of 'body', we may traditionally think of something solidly there. In the Cartesian sense, there is the body and the world, the body and the mind, inner and outer. But approaching embodying more naïvely, we find a living body that inhabits situations intimately; it interweaves the realms as a matter of being and is itself often 'lost' out there in the textures, the senses, the flesh, the histories and the meanings that come from the flowing excesses of the lifeworld. Yet it also carries personal history and pre-reflective sediments of historical meanings which shape its openness. One could say that embodying is where being and knowing meet, or as Gendlin says: 'the body knows its situation directly' (1997, p.26), and further: 'A living body knows its environment by being it.' (1997, p.27). The body is an intentional body, primordially relational, and co-arising with its situation that is not just fleshly perceptual but also full of implicit meanings and relational understanding. What are these relational understandings and how can we talk of bodily relational understandings that are faithful to the way embodiment appears as its interweavings, its non-linearity, its unpackaged presences and its vague tentative formings. Logical language does not like these cracks, whisperings, and ambiguities where space/time sequences are not simply

sequential. For Gendlin, perception is not primary as it is already based on a distinction between 'over there' from 'over here' - something important is happening before this spatial distinction in the way that meaning unfolds. As he describes it: 'Perception is never first and never alone' (1997, p.15). Faithful to the depth of bodily relational understandings, we could say that the way we are bodily in situations exceeds any precise formulation or patterning of it. This phenomenon is usefully metaphorised by Gendlin as a 'preseparated multiplicity' and this involves experiencing 'mores'.

Even though these 'mores' can be formulated, languaged and patterned, (many things can come from 'there') what is referred to in different ways by the languaged formulations is often all-together as an interrelated multiplicity, implicitly 'there' in the 'more'. This 'all-together' has order, specificity and vitality and functions intimately and in an ongoing way in the coming to being of meaning. To quote Lieberman, (1997): 'It has been [Gendlin's] principal effort to describe, develop, demonstrate that there are lived orders that are orderly in more than formed ways' (p.253). But like Heidegger's 'unsaid', the 'more' is always what the 'said' is about. The 'more' is the being of the 'said' even though the 'said' can change the 'more'. To make this a little more experiential you may want to sense, for example, the feel of a hot summer's night, just being in that. This whole experience is carried by the body and is 'more' than the heat, 'more' than who you were with, 'more' than other personal times and places that resonate with the hot, summer's night. The experiential sense of all this can be thematised and languaged, and meaningful aspects separated out from this 'preseparated multiplicity'. So the body functions in situations as a background knowing of how the situation is as a whole before perceiving its distinctions. Such lived body sensing of situations, through 'being them' is adequate to the contact with lived meanings that language can be about. Without such an intimate connection before separation, the meanings of language would have no 'about'. Even though language has the power to change the 'about', the lived experience, the 'about' is always grounded in it's 'more'. And the body is the intimate medium of the 'more'. The 'more' (situation) present within embodying is not vague and amorphous but 'very exact and precise, more precise than the common phrases and distinctions. But it is not given in convenient cognitive units' (Gendlin, 1997, p.16).

Gendlin's notion of the 'more' brings together Heidegger's 'unsaid' in a very concrete way to which the body has experiential access and is always already there as part of our everyday lives. The 'more' is:

- Not reflectively already achieved before us; one needs to go into a kind of 'murky' or a kind of 'down there' or 'in there', a 'not quite that but something else'; This involves an aesthetic process of finding



the words or differentiating movements, or symbolising something in such a way that does some of this 'more' a degree of justice.

- Very fertile. Many strands or specific meanings can come from it - but it is itself an 'unseparated multiplicity'.
- Very specific even though it is unseparated in direct experiencing. It is specific in that it implies particular directions, actions, and speech. So for example, there may be a sense of something about where I stand in relation to Gadamer. As it finds language, what comes is a particular appreciation of Gadamer's ethics (Yes, his 'ethics' is what it is), and this gives me a particular specific direction by which I can position myself in relation to some of Heidegger's thinking. His 'ethics' was in the 'more' of my relationship to him and as this meaning is lifted out of the implicit mesh, it gives me the possibility of a very specific direction for action and speech. In this experiencing/languageing process, Gadamer is much more than a series of completed thoughts in my memory. He is a kind of presence for me with whom I can dialogue. His presence for me is not identical to him but also exceeds any formulated thoughts that I have had about him. His presence is in a sense 'alive' and productive for me and there is the potential for an ongoing dialogue where the 'more' comes to me 'through a glass darkly' stirring in its gradually forming shapes as they are bodily felt and recognised, and finding distinctive forms in workable language. 'Yes, his ethics,' I say again.

Another way of indicating this is to put the word 'embodied' together with the word 'experiencing': 'Experiencing is the process of concrete, bodily feeling, which constitutes the basic matter of psychological and personality phenomena' (Gendlin, 1964, p.111). To put this another way, bodily experiencing is the place where the presence of 'more than orderly patterns' of what comes to us first gathers. In relation to bodily experiencing, Gendlin uses the term 'felt sense' to indicate something much more interactional and intentional than subjective inner bodily sensations that only speak of internal events: 'What one feels is not 'stuff inside' but the sentience of what is happening in one's living in the outside' (Gendlin, 1997b, p.41). Referring to some post-modern theorists who overly prioritise language, Lieberman (1997) draws on this notion of the interactional open body to which the 'more' comes, to remark that there is a 'texture of life still to be made contact with after deconstruction' (p.261). This is an important remedy to the notion that signs only point to other signs endlessly and provides a crucial bodily grounding to language. It is Gendlin's contribution to the relationship between bodily experiencing and language, and the role of this tension for 'what it means to understand', that may be helpfully directional for qualitative research.

Even though language and experience are implicated in one another, they cannot be reduced to one another nor replace one another in the ongoing aliveness that is understanding. Language unfolds distinctions from an embodied sense of the 'more' (experiencing) and these distinctions in turn become part of the specific history of the 'more'. Thus, such explicit unfolding of meanings is not just a meaning-making that leaves the 'more' as it was, as if the process of explication did not carry the 'more' forward into new relationships that reconstitute it as what itself is. The 'more' is not a box of 'essences' that is unchanged by the process of languaged 'lifting-outs'. Yet, although the 'more' changes in its interaction with language, it still exceeds the way it is packaged and continues its endless pregnancy. The 'more' of bodily-grounded experience is always open beyond cognitive units and is 'always open for further living and action' (Gendlin, 1997, p.7). So we are talking about a kind of language that is released from the logic of identity, a language that has the power to say more than any circumscribed pattern, one that exceeds its own distinctions. The 'more' of the whole situation is not just a static truth; 'it involves the implying of further situations, events and actions' (Gendlin, 1992, p.93). So 'language cannot work alone' (Gendlin, *ibid.*). It needs the body and the 'more' (a big challenge for computer models of artificial intelligence). And the body cannot work alone either. It needs language to form further from itself until the distinctions are ready to stand out at least for a moment in shared space. It is in this relationship of mixing and separating that language, embodiment and the 'more' are intimately related and cannot be fully reduced to one another.

So this 'mesh of ' potential lived meanings is in Gendlin's words, 'intricate'; it is not indeterminate even though it is excessive of formed patterns in its aliveness. Meaning-making is thus a bodily inclusive hermeneutic cycle in which one's bodily-sensed-situation-in-relation-to-words 'gives the words a new life' (Gendlin, 1997, p.8). Such 'life' is beyond any pattern even though the pattern may have been historically languaged as part of the changing history of the 'intricacy' of the 'more'. And such meanings live freshly: 'Whenever we enter the experiencing of anything that is being talked about, we immediately find an intricacy with vast resources that goes beyond the existing public language' (Gendlin, 1997, p.37).

### **Back to the question: What it means to understand**

The subtle relationship that Gendlin articulates between embodied experience and language may help us to elaborate our question of 'what it means to understand' with a new embodied emphasis. He is attempting to establish a philosophy of understanding that moves forward with the body and language and others, towards meanings that are always at the edge of

the play of the old with the new. The qualities of this are both centring and decentring, home and adventure, a vital tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar.

The validity of such understanding can never correspond to the way things are (one can not get into the same river twice). The validity of such understanding is rather in the way that it 'carries forward' meanings into new productive relationships in the future. Validity in this sense cannot thus be separated from a consideration of use and ethics. In drawing close to experience, words are instructional rather than merely 'descriptive'; they invite us into further experiencing of the 'more' exceeding them and, in languaging the 'more' further, this re-situates the 'more', and the 'more' itself becomes more intricate. Understanding is a kind of reaching beyond formulated cognitions; it uses 'fuzzy specifics' and the body is intimate to 'fuzzy specifics'. But 'fuzzy specific' also wants something very precise from language in the way it would like to be 'carried forward'. So we cannot construct the right words in a very active way: 'Words come to us in much the same way that emotions, appetite, fatigue and other bodily events come; in appropriate ways that cannot be forced or fabricated' (Hatab, 1997, p.242). It wants just 'these series' of words in explicating the implicit of the 'fuzzy mores'. The 'fuzzy more' wants a languaged home to rest for a moment before further adventure - a resting in familiar surroundings before all this becomes part of a new 'more' that is full of the new 'unsaid' adventure. Understanding is this intersection of bodily adventure, languaged home. Understanding is always asking for 'crossings' and 'intercourse'; it is always richer than it was and here Gendlin is cautionary about Husserl. Descriptions should not be summative but rather invitational. The danger of summations is that such descriptions could 'replace experience, to make it no longer necessary' (Gendlin, 1997, p.39). This would give experiencing no continuing role in understanding. In an embodied way, understanding is rather a procedure which includes the invitation to experience more. So 'meaning...is not only a certain *logical* structure (although it can use such fixed statements as well) but also involves a *felt* experiencing' (Gendlin 1997b, p.1). And here we come to Gendlin's procedure of 'focusing' as a form of engagement that honours the embodied nature of understanding, its grounding in the 'unsaid', and the power of language to move.

### **Focusing as embodied inquiry**

If we understand with more than thoughts and more than forms, and if conceptual formulations never work alone without reference to an experienced world that disappears into the 'unsaid', then understanding involves a bodily grounded practice in which, as human beings, we are intimate with the 'unsaid' and intimate with the 'said'. As human beings, we move in these realms, and in our everyday lives, have already been doing

this ever since we can remember. Focusing is a more intentional and disciplined way of doing this. It originated from Gendlin's work with Carl Rogers in which he noted the processes that psychotherapy clients went through when they experienced new understandings that made a difference to the way they felt and lived. He noticed that the 'place' from which their speaking happened was a 'more' and that it first came as a bodily felt sense of their situation. He developed these insights further as both a philosopher and psychotherapist and called the process 'focusing'. It involves a process that can be taught to psychotherapy patients and others and has also been used in a number of creative pursuits such as poetic writing and doing philosophy. I am not able to give a full exposition of this disciplined process but will lift out some important features that may be relevant to a subsequent discussion on the implications of embodied enquiry for qualitative research:

1. I attend to a definitely felt but conceptually vague experiencing. This is done after I bring my awareness into the body and wait for some felt relationships to what I am engaged in to form. There are various aids to this but a 'felt sense' comes that is recognised as pregnant with some meaning that is not yet articulate, for example, 'something about my unfinished paper that needs attention'.
2. I draw on the power of language, gesture or symbol and begin to be open to 'words' or ways of describing the sense of the 'something.' There is a subtle kind of dipping back and forth between the 'felt sense' and a way of 'languaging' this in a broad sense. For example, the words that come about my unfinished paper are that it needs more 'unfolding' at just 'that' stage which I can picture.
3. I check to see how the phrase or narrative fits with the felt sense, how it resonates as an aesthetically satisfying experience. How do those words or phrases work? In my example, the phrase 'more unfolding' is not quite what it is; the phrase 'it needs more air' fits better.
4. The phrase may become part of a new experiencing that is productive of further explicit meanings. In my example, the words that fitted better were: 'it needs more air'. My body resonated with this and took it up in a way that implicitly crossed with a whole lot of other meanings which fitted. This new experiencing generated new phrases and words which told me more about the precise manner of my paper 'needing more air': 'yes, that place is too condensed where I said that - it is not just too condensed but it also needs more air in the sense of allowing my readers to bring their own interpretations to it - I have been too specific in defining things at that place.'
5. This back and forth between the 'more' of experiencing and the differentiations of language continue as a productive process of more refined understanding. And this is welcome and received as almost a

relief of tension in my body. The meanings feel more digested and I would feel in a better position to dialogue these meanings with others and bring them into the shared world of intersubjective understanding.

6. This would then set up a new process in which others would become part of the depth of the 'more'.

Two important things could be highlighted about this process:

- a) Referring to the 'more' usually appears to need some silence, a kind of 'waiting' and a willingness to feel the meanings of what may need attention or what wants to be said.
- b) The 'manner of experiencing' seems important: a certain 'immediacy' of what is living about all this now, its presence, its fresh detail. This 'manner of experiencing' can be helped by another's presence and both Gendlin and Carl Rogers have spent much time trying to articulate the characteristics of another's presence that is facilitative in this kind of way.

So now we are ready to come to the final section of this paper and the implications of embodied inquiry for qualitative research.

## **Embodied understanding and phenomenologically-oriented qualitative research**

Max van Manen provides a succinct and helpful starting point for a consideration of phenomenology as applied to qualitative research: 'It is best to think of the basic method of phenomenology as the taking up of a certain attitude and practising a certain attentive awareness to the things of the world as we live them rather than as we conceptualise or theorise them' (Van Manen, 2000, p.460). This requires us to use accounts of experiences that may be gathered in different ways (interviews, written descriptions, even fictional narratives). So far, this is consistent with Gendlin who would 'seek to articulate experience as actually had rather than laying some invented theoretical scheme on experience' (Gendlin, 1973, p.317).

The phenomenologically-oriented researcher engages with these accounts of experiences in a way that can articulate important understandings from these experiences that may be relevant to others and that can take understanding further. The ongoing controversy is whether we can call these literary articulations and understandings 'essences' in the sense that Husserl originally meant them. He was interested in the possibility of the almost mathematical quest of finding what is most invariant across examples of phenomena so that if those invariants changed, the phenomenon could no longer be what it is. This is a certain kind of philosophical and imaginative thinking which is designed to produce understandings about what is most general about experienced phenomena. Gendlin's take on this, and what we have said about 'embodied

understanding', would suggest that what is 'most general' about experienced phenomena can never be the final thing said about that phenomenon. So, for example, we could say that anger has a potentially 'explosive' quality and that we can recognise this quality in many examples of anger. As soon as we see and say 'explosiveness' about anger, we have already begun to engage in how this word 'explosiveness' takes us in an experiential direction that opens up certain further meanings and closes others off.

So a new nuance on the meaning of anger is evoked, and we understand so called 'essences' only in terms of how the received generality opens up further specific aspects of the experience. There is always a 'more' in living and we cannot say this all at once and finally. The phenomenon 'anger' can be understood in richer ways but each new word or phrase is not an 'essence' but rather a 'gathering'. It is a gathering that is instructional, as if to say: when the 'explosiveness' of anger is named, see how 'anger' in the contexts you are interested in is better understood and leads to even further productive understandings and meaningful connections. The word, 'explosiveness' is thus a 'lived platform' and bridge rather than an 'essence'. It is an intersubjective bridge as well as a bridge between the experienced phenomenon (anger) and its 'more' - the as yet unsaid about anger. Gendlin deals with a possible worry about the fluidity and endless progression of this journey as follows:

*The method may seem as if it launches us on an endless progression, but even here there are methodic ways of knowing when a desirable stopping point is reached; again the stopping point is not a final statement of an experience, but rather a way of structuring words or situations so that some living, some action, or some intellectual task may be carried out. With respect to the final nature of experience, there is no stopping point to statement, because the nature of experiencing vis-à-vis further structuring is precisely that it can be further structured and in several different ways*

(Gendlin, 1973, p.305).

What this means for qualitative research is that it repositions our task as one that is an ongoing 'conversation' that seeks to share 'good words' and phrases that are evocative and 'carry understanding' further. It is a community journey. Such embodied understanding is also a further invitation to experiencing in that it seeks to show and evoke the presence of a lived experience through words. Fresh sense-making occurs as a bodily-experienced recognition and the one who understands further provides a temporary home for what is understood. She crosses this 'other', this phenomenon, this adventure, with her own possibilities. In such embodied understandings, the language 'works' in ways that are open to that which is beyond formal boundaries, the unsaid life of the

phenomenon. The qualitative researcher within this spirit is a mediator and facilitator who carries forward understandings distilled from informants' accounts into a shared world. The task is to share understanding in a habitable way. So, to facilitate embodied understanding is to make understanding 'habitable' for others. This kind of qualitative research serves a communal, cultural quest that straddles 'home' and 'adventure'. In order for qualitative research to pursue embodied understanding, it requires procedures that show phenomena in both experientially evocative as well as structurally coherent ways. Such home-making is finally a narrative offering which can be poetic in its evocative power but is not just poetry; it includes the kind of details and examples that show phenomena in a systematic and even logical manner. The 'words' from 'embodied understanding' participate in a paradoxical quality:

- On one hand, they forge a fruitful distance from the specific embodied occasion by allowing some generalities that are transferable across these occasions.
- On the other hand, they remain responsively connected to the aliveness of the specific experiential occasions, inviting the bodily 'more' of participation.

Such an emphasis would reframe the idea of 'essence' to be that of an 'authentic productive linguistic gathering'. This term takes into account how the outcome of phenomenologically-oriented inquiry is grounded in textured bodily experience, that it takes its validity from 'good' words that work in a productive (and perhaps ethical) way, and that the status of the 'linguistic gathering' refers to 'real' happenings that are neither absolute nor relative but 'always on the way', in play with 'home' and 'adventure'. Such an 'authentic productive linguistic gathering' keeps experiencing alive in ongoing embodied understanding.

I believe that all this puts a particular emphasis on the goal of phenomenologically-oriented qualitative research and that this has important implications for the path and practice of such research; how we formulate our research inquiry, how we interview and dialogue with research respondents, how we analyse and explicate the experiences of others, and how we write up and offer for reading the products of our understanding. (Todres, 1998, 1999, 2000). In these specific pursuits, the practice of Focusing that has developed out of Gendlin's philosophy may become a very helpful innovation for phenomenologically-oriented research. Incorporating this practice of Focusing may result in outcomes that are different and deeper than other qualitative research approaches. This is because it 'opens up the whole vast implicit experiential level' (Gendlin, 2003, personal communication). The 'more' to this story may await further meeting-grounds.

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