

Practitioner Perspective

Embodied Collaborative Inquiry: a Pragmatic Practice-Based Research Approach

By Billy Desmond



Introduction

This paper illuminates the development of collaborative inquiry as a practice-based research approach that is embodied, field orientated, pragmatic and of use to humanistic psychotherapy practitioners. The embodied collaborative inquiry method advocates a democratic and co-operative approach in the co-constructing of knowledge and meaning that is of the lived body and embedded in an intersectional field.

My argument here is not to dismiss evidence-based or more positivist perspectives of mixed-method research per-se, but to caution us as to their suitability

for humanistic, and in particular relational Gestalt and Integrative orientated-practitioners who value a participatory and more democratic I-Thou (Buber,1958) process of relating. I will illustrate this form of research with an example from a collaborative inquiry process of embodied group supervision that I as supervisor co-created with three supervisees.

New Paradigms for Practice-Based Research

Traditionally, in more positivist-orientated research, the researcher is constructed as ‘expert’ with hierarchical power in such territories as methodology, methods, knowledge and arbiter of

meaning-making. The researcher develops a hypothesis and then investigates this by researching **on** people and there is a tendency to be invested in the dissemination of universal truths to others (Crocker, 2017), as is the case with evidence-based practice. These are rigorous quantitative research processes, which require significant funding and often inform national health policy and the types of psychological interventions supported. However, the participants of such research endeavours are generally not involved other than as data sources, even though an ethics of care is dutifully honoured. Outcome research, which has its uses, such as the Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation – Outcome Measure (CORE-OM) is an example of this approach (Stevens, Stringfellow, Wakelin & Waring, 2011).

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separation between the observer and the observed. There is a focus on empiricism rather than on more aesthetic forms of knowing that humanistic psychotherapy practitioner researchers experience in their daily relational practice with clients. Aesthetic knowing is;

“...emergent (it is born at a given instant), ephemeral (it only lasts as long as a given experience), bodily (it is incarnate in the senses and in the resonance of the body’) (Francesetti 2012, p. 6)”,

Aesthetic knowing is also intersubjective as an emerging contact phenomenon between people. I am particularly concerned about evidence-based studies where experience becomes isolated from its context. While it may be idiographic, the full aesthetics of human experience are lost for the sake of clarity and communication (Yontef & Jacobs, 2014).

My contention is that embodied and collaborative practice-based humanistic psychotherapy research offers unique opportunities to co-inquire into the sacredness and unfolding beauty of person-person relationships. Thus, in the collaborative inquiry approach I am about to share with you, psychotherapy practitioner-researchers research **with** people, **not on** or **to** people. I

consider this a radical return to the relationship as the foundation for healing and change in human encounters within our practice and as part of the research process.

Collaborative Inquiry as a Dialogical Researching Process

Collaborative inquiry is defined by relational concerns. It is an approach where researchers work “...openly, directly and collaboratively with the primary actors in their various fields of interest” (Reason 1988 p.3). So, what does it look like? Individuals with a particular interest convene as a research group. All persons irrespective of role have a sense of involvement and ownership of the research process, where the application of the learning is a dynamic process (Anderson, 2007), with the hope that it can be translated into practice. This method is available to all psychotherapy practitioners (whether formally researching or not), who are committed to enhancing the efficacy of their practice. A collaborative approach to inquiry offers the opportunity to inquire into the lived human experience where participants are not objects to be studied or researched on but fellow inquirers to inquire *with* “...[where] one person is ongoingly and reciprocally in contact with others” (Bloom, 2009, p.37).

For example, several of us met as a supervision group with a shared interest in exploring embodied ways of knowing to support understanding of the client-therapist relationship that was a core task of supervision. Our supervision group was the source of our inquiry. The group constituted of one supervisor (me) and three psychotherapist supervisees, (two women and one man). Whilst I as supervisor

initiated the process, the research became shared as supervisees led and shaped the areas of interest for exploration. Our initial focus was on developing the necessary supports for the lived body to be more available for each of us as we worked together. We met fortnightly for three hours and then spent 20 minutes post supervision, critically reflecting on the work. The meeting was recorded, transcribed, and shared amongst all members to be ‘analysed’ in order to identify emerging themes and learning. Differentiation was welcomed in order to integrate a multiplicity of perspectives and to avoid oversimplification of phenomena.

Such co-inquiry is a relational and reflexive process and demands of each researcher that they engage in ‘me-search,’ because personal experience is integral to the inquiry. The process is demanding. It requires those involved to be committed to rigorously examining how she/he is contributing to the research situation and how they are being affected by each other. This is a radical departure from more traditional methods of qualitative research where the primary researcher remains the custodian of the process and the creator of what is constructed and conveyed as knowledge.

Primacy of The Lived Body is Integral to Embodied Collaborative Inquiry

More traditional forms of collaborative inquiry involve a number of interested parties who gather to explore through the ‘act of observing’ an area of shared interest that is related to *their practice*. The underlying assumption is a separation or distancing of the observer and observed. As contact is ‘...the simplest and first reality’ (Perls

et al., 1951/1994, p.3), the foundation of experience is our lived body. The lived body is the sentient, animating, resonating and purposive whole person that touches and is touched by the environment, and is an expression of the here and now relational situation.

We developed a process of supporting our 'gathering' at the beginning of each supervision session that was somatically orientated. All members took time to scan their whole bodies, to heighten awareness of the here and now co-creating experience. Each member was invited to notice their quality of contacting with the environment and with each other, and notice what emerged. Participants shared their here-and-now experience with or without words. Some members moved, or made a gesture. Others may have used objects or manipulated materials e.g. drawing, Plasticine to present how s/he was.

Including the lived body as central to the research process beckons us to honour multiple ways of knowing that include the pre-reflective, pre-reflexive and pre-verbal, not just the 'act of observing'. Our bodies know the score (van der Kolk, 2014) and are not a thing but an event (Claxton, 2015) that is foundational to conceptual knowing. This moment-to-moment unfolding of experience is revealed in the movement-to-movement of our gestural actions with others. This can be noticed in the language of words as manifest in action verbs (Robine, 2011), and through the language of our bodies in the kinaesthetic resonance (Frank & LaBarre, 2011) that emerges of the co-creating relational research situation.

Humanistic psychotherapists may be well resourced for such co-inquiry. Often due to the relational

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orientation of training, humanistic psychotherapists have a capacity to begin with 'what is', the actuality of the present moment and track how experience unfolds 'between' people through our embodied responses. Discovery comes into existence through our embodied dialogue with others.

How Can Practitioners Engage in Embodied Collaborative Inquiry?

An embodied collaborative inquiry approach is best represented as a series of interconnected cycles of inquiry in the form of a spiral (Figure 1). The spiral form suggests a dynamic process that is full of movement. The number

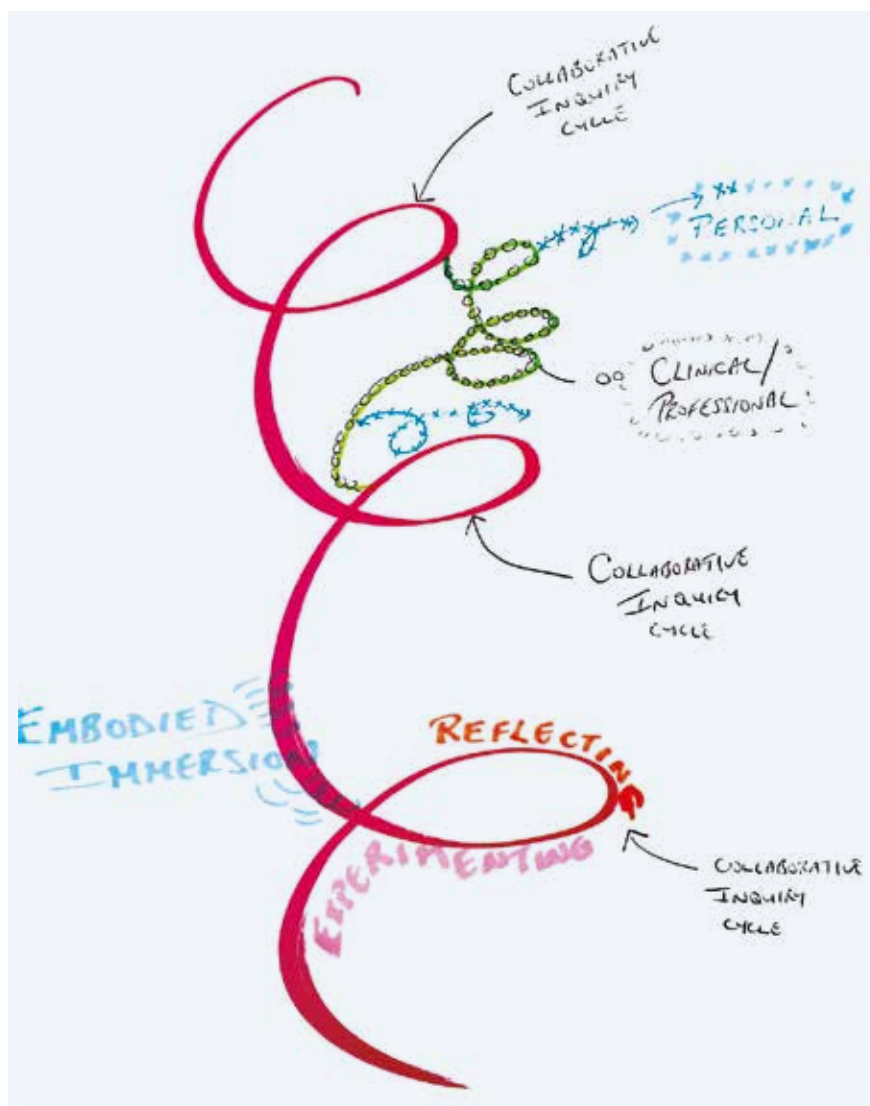


Figure 1: Cycles of Collaborative Inquiry

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and duration of cycles required will depend on the constraints of time and resources as well as the complexity of the topic under investigation. Staying experience-near to the data as it emerges through the inquiry process often requires an updating and refining of the original planned cycles and their sequencing.

The way data is documented depends on the nature and focus of the inquiry. Data can be gathered through a variety of forms such as: audio and visual recording of work; transcribing content from recordings; reflective writing journals; visual and poetic representations; dance and movement; use of clay, Plasticine® and sand. Consent to participate or withdraw in a collaborative inquiry is a relational process and is revisited through dialogue between members at various stages of the research process.

This process of inquiry is an iterative one. Each cycle begins with an inquiry question generally framed as a 'what or how'. In collaborative inquiry every question has a clear intention to critically investigate an aspect of lived experience that is deemed relevant for the focus of research. As the research progresses each subsequent cycle is framed with an inquiry question that is shaped and informed by the learning from the previous cycle. For instance, one of our initial cycles was framed as "how do we foster embodied awareness within group supervision?"

As learning emerged each subsequent question framed a particular cycle of inquiry, for example; how is the heightening of embodied awareness affecting the work of group supervision? How does attending to the developmental moving patterns of the lived body, affect exploration of the client-therapist work?

In this process "inquiry is a continuous beginning" (Merleau Ponty, 1960/1964, p. 161) and each new cycle whether planned or emergent offers the opportunity to grasp, if only for a moment, a 'thick description' of the now, that throws a shadow towards the 'next'. Any interpretations and pre-mature meaning making is bracketed and placed aside. Such a process is one of distillation as the research focus is refined and supported by a disciplined phenomenological inquiry of the lived body and 'its' relationship to the wider field.

Phases Within an Inquiry Cycle

Each inquiry cycle, whether planned or emergent has three distinct and overlapping aspects, which require attention to foster rigor and relevance in the collaborative inquiry process. These aspects are: embodied immersion, critical reflecting/reflexivity, and experimenting.

Embodied immersion within the here-and-now requires participants to "...plunge into the world instead of looking at it from the above" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 38-39). The here-and-now of the group and the question that orients the

field of interest is fully fleshed, where "*affective feelings and tactile kinaesthetic feelings are experientially intertwined*" (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009, p.202, italics in original). Instead of leading prematurely with thinking, or finding the experiential evidence that confirms our sedimented assumptions, beliefs or constructs; we immersed ourselves in the now of our situation. As co-inquirers we committed to focusing attention to the lived body as if the skin boundary was open to movements of the experiential field.

We are seeking to discover and co-create supports for a particular inquiry cycle, which is framed by a specific question. The intent is yet to be realised in the immersion phase. This may seem paradoxical in a research activity. On the one hand we need to remain open to all that is visible and invisible as it is only then "are we able to contemplate and be informed by the unknown" (Barber, 2006, p. 66) and simultaneously the pull is also towards honing and refining to create meaning and knowledge. In this phase dwelling and trusting different ways of knowing beyond the cognitive, rational and worded allow us explore and develop different creative methods of inquiry that are locally emergent and experienced – near in relation to the focus of the inquiry within a specific cycle.

Critical reflecting and reflexivity occurs within the arc of embodied dialogue amongst group members. A critical reflexivity recalls the past practice to the present as a wholly embodied experience. This practice of reflexivity and reflexivity as an embodied inclusion may feel strange as it invites us to adopt

a hermeneutics of trust rather than suspicion or scepticism (Orange, 2011). This aspect of the inquiry is the ground of sense-making - an aesthetic endeavour when phenomena are described in multi-various ways beyond the rational, or language of experience with words. The group configuration of embodied collaborative inquiry holds each individual to account as they reflect-in-action and reflect-on-action. It insists that practitioners make a conscientious effort to “tell the truth about the making of the account” (Gergen & Gergen, 2000, p. 1028) to each other, and it includes multiplicity of experiences of self-in-relation and the forces of the wider field that the research is occurring within. Such a practice may be uncomfortable but it is fundamental in arriving at some knowledge with rigour and confidence, if only tentative and temporary.

During the supervision we engaged in a process of critically reflecting after each supervisory task to ascertain if heightening awareness of our embodied process was illuminating and of support to the supervisee and task being explored. Also, as we listened to tapes, reviewed the transcripts, our utterances and emerging movements or images were integrated as potential sources to facilitate meaning making and extract the learning for us all as co-inquiry participants of embodied group supervision.

Experimenting is also required to gather and give form to learning. Learning is garnered during an inquiry cycle by a willingness to surrender to each other, while remaining open to being irrevocably changed by

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incorporating the multiplicity of perspectives shared. In an inquiry process this learning needs to be applied. There is no change without some movement happening. Otherwise it remains a theory beholden to the conjecture of those involved in the act of meaning making and may have little relevance for practice. Experimenting determines the relevance of any emerging research findings. We need to create the conditions to become adept in the practice of experimenting, knowing it can take a multiplicity of forms, occur over different time sequences (e.g. here and now, each session), and is emergent and co-constructed. Within collaborative inquiry, experimenting can occur in the group as well as in co-inquirers own lives and professional practice.

For example, a supervisee was invited to remember the therapeutic situation and immerse her/himself in the remembering of the co-created encounter, noticing any images, colours, smells, movements, and particular sounds/phrases. The supervisee was invited to constellate group members and objects in different parts of the room to reflect the therapeutic situation being explored. Group members were invited to pay attention to their bodily sensations, affect, feeling and movements. Next, I (the author) invited the supervisee to imagine him/herself as therapist in this co-created situation and sculpt the group by changing each

person's posture or position in relation to each other to reflect the specific therapeutic situation/theme. The aim is to trust the knowing through the body

“which precedes the intellectual working out and clarification of the meaning” (Merleau-Ponty, 1995/1962, p.185).

All group members were invited to pause and notice their kinaesthetic and affective sense in their bodies as they experienced the totality of this situation. Each person shared his/her experience first through a movement or gesture. After each person had moved the whole situation was once again attended and words in the form of ‘I statements’ were invited from each person to express what they now ‘know’ of this situation as an expression of the here and now relational field and there and now therapeutic situation. Once the process was completed all group members were invited to ‘de-role’, and reconvene as a group. Attending to the rhythm of the breathing and animating body in awareness supported this whole experience to be sensed and felt. Finally, the supervisee who was exploring her/his therapeutic work reflected on the process and articulated the meaning-making that she/he made for the on-going work with her/his client.

The process of experimentation allows practitioners the freedom to apply learning whilst always

remaining sensitive and aware of the intersectionality of situations, persons and their lived body experiences. And, it provides an opportunity to critique a discovery from the research activity in practice, as a way of demonstrating that any theory or meaning-making is contextualised and not a truth for all time and all moments.

Conclusion

An embodied collaborative inquiry approach has a utility for all participants involved, not only the researcher(s) and others in the scholarly field. It is a dialogical approach that fosters a democratic orienting as all parties involved move between the parts and the whole- all the while honouring differentiation in the process of sense-making and meaning-making. I believe such an approach to understanding the lived experience of human beings "...demystifies research and treats it as a form of learning

that should be accessible to everyone interested in gaining a better understanding" (Bray, Lee, Smith & Yorks, 2000, p.3). Collaborative inquiry is messy, at times confusing and sometimes may feel overwhelming. Inquiry in this way is a lived body experience, and not hermetically sealed to the research situation only but embedded in a context that impresses upon all involved.

Sense-making occurs between people as a shared responsibility and requires a vulnerability of those involved to remain open to being changed during the inquiry process. In so doing we may "simultaneously challenge existing traditions of understanding, and offer new possibilities for action" (Gergen, 1999, p. 49). Such co-creating of knowledge and learning is always temporal, of given relational situations that are embedded in an interconnected mesh of phenomenal, social, professional, political and ecological fields. ☺

Billy Desmond

Billy Desmond - MBA, Dip Gestalt, MSc Gestalt psychotherapy. UKCP & ECP registered psychotherapist. Billy is an individual and group psychotherapist, supervisor, dialogical educator, practitioner researcher in Co. Clare with interests in the intersectionality of embodiment, sexuality and groups. He is also a faculty member at Gestalt Institute of Ireland, guest faculty at Gestalt training institutes, and a certified trainer of Developmental Somatic Psychotherapy. He is co-chair of the Gender & Sexual Diversity Interest Group and AAGT board member. He has published journal papers/chapters on group-work, experiential ways of knowing, sustainability, spirituality, homophobia, gay men, and co-authored a book *Introduction to Gestalt* (Sage, 2013).

Contact Details:

billy.desmond@icloud.com

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