

The Ouroboros (Part 2): Towards an intersubjective-heuristic method for ecopsychology research

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The Ouroboros has been said to have a meaning of infinity or wholeness... [it] is a dramatic symbol for the integration and assimilation of the opposite (Jung, 1955-6: 513).

Abstract

In part one of *The Ouroboros*¹ we make the case for an “ontology of interconnectedness” in ecopsychology research. Here, in part two, we lay out our development of an intersubjective-heuristic research method, based on this ontological ground. This method expands Moustakas’ original formulation of heuristic research to include intersubjective enquiry between researchers, ecological contextualisation, social activism, and engagement with the unconscious. In the final section, we address issues of error and validity.

Keywords: Ecopsychology, gestalt ontology, heuristic research, intersubjectivity, unconscious.

Introduction

In part one of *The Ouroboros*¹ we make the case for an “ontology of interconnectedness” in ecopsychology research, and argue that we need to move away from the myopia of positivist methods. Here, in part two, we lay out our formulation of an intersubjective-heuristic method, based on this ontological ground. We have developed this method through our practice as ecopsychologists over the years, but especially through the design and facilitation of WWF’s

¹ See this issue, pp. 48-60.

“Natural Change Project” (WWF, 2009, 2010; Key & Kerr, 2011; Key & Kerr, 2012).

Heuristic Method

Clark Moustakas’s (1990) heuristic method is the starting point for our work. His method is based on the philosophies of Gendlin and Polanyi, and follows a structured pattern of engagement and reflection (see Appendix 1). In this section, we will outline the theoretical background of heuristic research, and our perspective on its praxis.

In his existential philosophy, Gendlin (1997) describes two fundamentally separate realms: experiencing and symbolising. Experiencing has an ontological quality and is a continuous feature of human consciousness. Symbolising can represent experiencing in many different ways, but can never fully specify it. For example, the experience of being in a place we love can be symbolised in words, shapes, colours, music, textures, movements and so on. None of these symbols can ever fully “capture” the whole feeling of actually being there, but they can help lead us to a “felt sense” of the experience.

Gendlin’s theory is the philosophical basis of “focusing”, a technique which is used in the discovery process of heuristic research (Gendlin, 1978). In focusing, the practitioner alternately rests in the realms of experiencing and of symbolising. The process is iterative, and takes time, discipline and patience. With each shift between realms, symbolisation is refined: gradually, the momentum of this repeated movement builds up and allows fresh insights to emerge. The understandings that come from this process can be expressed in poetry, prose, sculpture, drawing, music and so on. The diversity of expressive media is much richer than that used in mainstream science.

Polanyi’s concept of “tacit knowing” (Moustakas, 1990) also informs the heuristic method. Tacit knowing is a way of intuitively getting to know the wholeness of something. Polanyi suggested that this happens when “subsidiary factors” (conscious, visible, easily described elements) combine with “focal factors” (which are unseen, implicit and subliminal) to make a complete body of knowledge.

Polanyi’s work was influenced by the notion of “active looking” explored by Wolfgang Von Goethe (1749-1832) who, in turn, developed insights from the

Hermetic tradition. Harding (2006) describes how, in this kind of looking, the object of study becomes part of the researcher:

If this works as it should, one can experience the suspension of one's preconceived notions and habitual responses about the thing being perceived, so that its exact sensorial qualities enliven and deepen perception... One has the intuitive perception of the thing as *within* oneself, and not as an object *outside* one's own being [original emphasis] (p. 34).

We would suggest that the object of our interest does not only live within us: we also live within it. For us, as ecopsychologists, our practice of heuristic method lets us dwell in the unknown interior of the natural phenomena we study, while opening to tacit knowledge. All the while, symbolic, experiential, focal and substantive factors are weaving through us into a pattern that opens our awareness to our part in a greater whole.

It is inevitable that working in this way, we become emotionally intimate with what we study. In a positivist paradigm, this would be seen as antithetical to good science. However, we believe that if we study this intimacy with nature 'from the inside', as we feel it, we can start to see how to heal the alienation which has led to our current ecological plight. "The recesses of feeling", wrote William James, "are the only places in the world in which we can catch real fact in the making, and directly perceive how even events happen, and *how work is actually done*". (1902: 492 – our emphasis)

As researchers, we share our lives with what we study; we are part of the same ever-changing gestalt; we cannot be separate. As Moustakas says,

...the researcher lives the question in waking, sleeping, and even dream states. Everything in his or her life becomes crystallized around the question (1990: 28).

The process can be like solving a zen koan,

Whether in actual zazen [sitting practice] or in working, walking, eating or sleeping, it becomes his [the practitioner's] 'thing'; he becomes a mass of existential concern wrapped around the koan... oneself becomes the koan question to be answered (King, 1970: 311).

Intense engagement with the question happens as a natural part of the research process, and this intensity is needed to produce something. But wrapping around the subject matter too tightly can cut off the flow from unknown into known and the process can become lifeless. As an essential counterpoint to the intense focus,

periods of relaxation and surrender to unknowing are built in to the heuristic method. Phases of surrender happen cyclically in the focusing process, and on a larger scale, in the incubation and contemplation phases (Appendix 1) where we completely come away from the question for a period of time. These smaller and larger openings to the unknown – like breathing in and out – are needed to allow something new to come into life. Relaxation and surrender unclench the mind's desperate grip on a problem, and allow space, mystery and freedom.

The relaxation phase also protects subtlety. It stops us from crushing our experiences into tight spaces. Braud and Anderson (1998: 4) highlight the need to engage in research “without violating, distorting or trivialising what we are studying”. Similarly, Romanyshyn (2007: 10), in his exploration of “research with soul in mind” says,

something is called for, a way of saying that does not monumentalize the occasion, pin it down with facts, exhaust it with explanations, or imprison it with ideas.

The relaxation phase can feel intimidating; it can bring a fear of the unknown, of becoming lost in infinite space, and at its most primal level – a fear of annihilation. Consequently, some kind of holding is necessary in this phase. Places, people and the method itself can all hold the process and help us feel safe enough to let go into the unknown. For example, not knowing can feel easier if we are sitting on a riverbank talking to someone we trust, instead of sitting in front of a computer alone. And if we are aware that not knowing is an essential part of our method, we can relax into what Keats (1817) called “negative capability” which is,

...when man [sic] is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact or reason.

While perhaps radical in the context of the Western scientific tradition, this level of comfort with not knowing is central to the Buddhist and Taoist traditions, which strongly influence our praxis.

Modifying the heuristic method

In this section we describe our modifications of the heuristic method. In addition to the practices described above, we have integrated four interconnected elements that we feel are vital for applying an heuristic method effectively to ecopsychology

research.

- These are:
1. intersubjective enquiry between researchers
 2. ecological contextualisation
 3. social activism
 4. engagement with the unconscious

Intersubjective enquiry

The heuristic approach sees its participants as “co-researchers”, who help the researcher create meanings and understandings. However, so far, heuristic research has been widely described as a solitary process where a lone researcher “draws it all together”. Perhaps this focus on the individual comes from humanistic psychology’s bias towards personal self-actualisation (Maslow, 1971). Moustakas is, after all, a humanistic psychologist.

We have expanded this humanistic method so that the stages of the heuristic process are engaged intersubjectively by more than one researcher (see Husserl, 1929). This collective effort and immersion can liberate the individual ego from fears of opening to the unknown. As any researcher knows, it is easy to become anxious and lose perspective when working in isolation. The companionship of others can help us to relax and widen our perspective. It can also help us to be more creative and playful in our thinking.

However, working with each other in this way does not only provide support, it also generates a creative tension. The intersubjective process is alchemical, dialectical; a potent force for creating something new. Sometimes we come into conflict, but it is in resolving these conflicts that relationship is deepened and new insights emerge.

Human relationships are always charged with unconscious phenomena that can become confusing. Unconscious processes can surface in the form of conflict that is difficult to resolve: they can also lead to collusion. Regular reflection on personal and shared processes, as well as external supervision is very useful in making these processes conscious. But crucially, as ecopsychologists, we also engage with the physical and metaphysical world of wider nature. This, more than anything else, helps us realign ourselves and come into authentic relationship with

each other and with the earth.

Ecological Contextualisation

Of fundamental importance in ecopsychology, research collaboration must extend beyond human beings if it is to be authentic. This is well explored in the ecopsychology literature of course, and is now starting to be acknowledged in transpersonal research. For example, Romanyshyn (2007, p153) suggests asking:

What do the other creatures with whom I share creation have to say about the work? Do the animals have a voice in it? The plants, the trees etc.?

Dialogue with our ecological context can help us understand psychological phenomena more deeply. For example, we started a project with a shared focusing session which developed into exploring the felt sense of a red berry. The quality of light filtering through the flesh of the berry helped us to see that we needed to investigate experiences of immanence and luminosity in matter. This insight led to an important - and otherwise hidden - line of exploration which was central to the task in hand.

For us, collaboration with nature goes far beyond the duality of metaphor. Ecological contexts can become synonymous with the unconscious itself. This allows unconscious phenomena to manifest physically and gives us a precious opportunity to explore previously unknown areas of the psyche (For more descriptions of how this can happen in practice, see Kerr & Key, 2012).

In transpersonal research, Jan Fisher (in Braud and Anderson, 1998) describes a parallel process between what is studied and how it is studied. Fisher, who was studying the experience of dance and movement engaged in a similar practice herself before interviewing participants:

By moving prior to the interview, as a researcher, I hoped to stay as closely connected to the material as possible and facilitate my own understanding of the experience of being-movement... I also hoped to establish a coparticipative relationship with the participant... so that I was on an equal footing with the participant and not distanced from the subject of study or from the participant (p. 185).

Right at the heart of our research method is an ecological collaboration with the larger body of the earth – as Fisher would put it, “a coparticipative relationship”.

All the way along, we go into wild nature to test our theories and to surrender in absolute humility to the potential that dwells there. This is an ever unfolding process. Our constant return to the earth is the fertile ground from which our intuitions and ideas emerge.

Social activism

Braud and Anderson (1998) have pointed out that heuristic research does not provide places for “direct social action”. Ecopsychology has emerged to meet an urgent need for personal and social transformation in the face of ecological crisis, so ecopsychology research must lead to social action.

We have found that the transformations we experience, as we open to the research process, support our activism (Key & Kerr, 2011). In this research method, we set a clear intention about the social and political purpose of our work. This intention then catalyses a chain reaction which generates a shared vision for positive social change. In turn, this creates a sense of solidarity and empowerment, and a willingness to make personal sacrifices for the collective good. The camaraderie that we feel also helps us build the same kind of esprit de corps in the groups we work with (WWF, 2009; Key & Kerr, 2011, 2012): this in turn helps them to learn how to support their own activism. The collaborative nature of the process also helps each individual develop a sense of where best to apply their particular talents as part of a team.

Spending time outdoors is an essential part of our activism. It is well documented, (see for example, Hartig et al., 1996; Ulrich et al, 1991; Kaplan & Talbot, 1983) that this provides numerous restorative benefits, and undoubtedly it helps to sustain us in our work. However, we would suggest that time outdoors is more than restorative, it is vital if we are to remain fully present to the ultimate purpose of our work.

We all, I suppose, admire the pioneers who, through endless meetings held in contaminated city air, succeeded in establishing wilderness areas in the United States. But their constant work in offices and corridors has largely ruined their capacity to enjoy these areas. They have lost the capacity to show, *in action*, what they care for; otherwise they would spend much more time (and even live) in the wilderness (Naess, 1986/1995 – original emphasis).

Because the heuristic method requires us to engage deeply, as we carry out our

research, we experience our own painful reactions to the trauma of our ecological predicament. We also experience joy and empowerment as we become more intimate with each other and with the rest of nature. These feelings keep us close to the primary aim of our work, and its urgency.

The research method we describe here harnesses intuitive and creative insight in service to each other and to the earth. As we see the practical usefulness of these insights in catalysing social change, we gain faith in the unconscious as a source of wisdom that can direct our activism.

Engaging with the unconscious

As we go deeper into the research, we go deeper into the unconscious. If we pay heed to the unconscious, it can be a great source of help and direction at all stages in the heuristic process (see Appendix 1). As Clements (1994-1995) says:

...methodology often evolves and changes during the research because of synchronicities, dreams, intuition, and other manifestations of inner knowing. The researcher is urged to pay attention to expressions of the unconscious throughout the research process (p. 119).

For example this dream offered us encouragement, and helped us reflect on the pace of a heuristic enquiry that we were engaged in:

I'm going climbing with Dave [Key]. To get to the bottom of the crag, we have to walk over some sand. It's dark coloured sand, and its consistency means that if you go too fast you come to a halt, and if you go too slow, you sink in. If you go at just the right pace, making progress is no problem (Kerr, personal journal entry 2010).

In his original description of heuristic research, Moustakas did not acknowledge the unconscious as an important motive force in research. This omission may be due to his humanistic, rather than psychodynamic perspective. This is partially corrected in Sela-Smith's (2002) later reformulation of heuristic method, where she advocates that co-researchers' experiences can be

valuable as reflectors of possible areas of resistance that may be out of conscious awareness in the form of denial, projection, or incomplete search. This sends the researcher back into the self to continue the self-search into deeper or more distant tacit dimensions, thus allowing the transformation to be more expansive (p. 78).

We are transformed by our contact with the unconscious. It is not just a helpful tool

in our research. It acts on us, and we act on it, until ultimately we become “plain citizens” of the process in which we work (Leopold, 1949). The prospect of this transformation can make us apprehensive, and we may try to avoid it – even without realising that is what we are doing. For example, Sela-Smith (2002) suggests that Moustakas (1990) may have shifted the emphasis of his research towards co-researchers and away from himself as an unconscious defence against uncertainty and personal pain. In her description of “Heuristic Self-Search Enquiry”, Sela-Smith reinstates the value of the researcher’s own life experience as a central reference point.

We believe that the researcher's personal pain can distort the heuristic process, and we have described specific ways in which this can happen, in Appendix 1. Krippner and Ryan (cited in Sela-Smith, 2002) suggest that internal structures created by all our experiences, woven into tacit knowledge, in the form of a “personal myth”, act as a “chaotic attractor” which pulls towards it experiences and interpretations which in turn support the existing structures of the researcher’s psyche. This principle is well known in psychotherapy. Our own past experience, particularly if it is traumatic, influences how we see the world (for example, Casement, 1985; Stewart and Joines, 1987; Young et al 2003). Also, as Peter Homans (cited in Romanyshyn, 2007: 14) points out, our cultural past – if it becomes ossified – can create a block to seeing clearly or moving freely:

our cultural monuments become problematic when the monument takes the place of the experience, and relieves us of the work of mourning and remembering.

However, whilst acknowledging that there is “an ethical imperative to make the complex process of research as conscious as possible, just as there is in therapy, in love and in life” (p. 136), Romanyshyn, far from seeing our own wounds as a problem in research, sees them as a deep creative source and strength. The personal myth is still a chaotic attractor, but one which draws the re-searcher back on a journey to find “what has been left behind” – the untold stories or neglected mindscapes of the researcher's childhood, family, land, culture, and so on.

Romanyshyn's formulation echoes an older way of knowing – the shamanic traditions, where strands connecting us to our ancestors, to our ecological context, and to ancient or archetypal stories are honoured as allies in understanding and healing the present. We would suggest that remembering our personal, collective

and ecological wounds, in both conscious and unconscious domains, is a vital source of motivation for ecopsychology research. As researchers, practitioners, and activists we need to be able to go into the darkness with a clear eye and an open heart. This gives us the best chance of understanding and healing these wounds. However, we not only need to remember our wounds. We also need to remember the joy we feel personally and collectively when we reconnect with our ecological selves. Ultimately, this joy is both our touchstone and our source (Naess, 1973).

Validity

Like quantitative research, qualitative research must address the question of error. Error in the positivist paradigm refers to something that does not faithfully reflect the one truth of “how things are”. But what we mean by “error” is inextricably linked to what we mean by “truth”. Positivism is based on a hidden assumption that the universe is infinitely comprehensible, and ultimately explicable by one unifying truth. The philosopher of science, Nicholas Maxwell (2002) describes this assumption as “neurotic” and indeed, it is hard to see how there can be any rational grounds for it.

In contrast to the positivist assumption, we would allow that the universe is mysterious, and that truths can be multiple, even paradoxical. “It is the hallmark of any deep truth” writes Nils Bohr, “that its negation is also a deep truth” (Delbrück, 1986: 167). In the context of psychological enquiry, Jung writes of this delicate subjectivism, “All the true things must change and only that which changes remains true” (Jung, 1955-6: 503).

From this perspective, “truth” is contradictory, ephemeral and infinitely relative. Obviously though, we believe that it is important to attempt to validate our work somehow! We need to work as part of a community where some notion of intersubjective validity operates.

We hold with Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) suggestion that qualitative methods should include ways of “establishing trustworthiness including credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability”. To do justice to these values, we follow methods such as prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, intersubjective reflection, and peer supervision. In addition to these usual methods, we also use the tenets of transpersonal validity advocated by Braud

and Anderson (1998). These include reference to bodily reactions, intuition and emotions – especially in focusing (Gendlin, 1978).

We are also aware of the important caveat that unconscious processes such as transference and projection can apparently come in on the same “frequency” as intuition, bodily reactions and emotions. Much of the subtle work in transpersonal psychotherapy uses this frequency. Often (but not always) it is possible to learn how to distinguish the “fools' gold” of processes like transference from the “real gold” of embodied and intuitive insight. In our experience, unconscious processes often have an incongruent feel when tested in the context of the here and now, even if the bodily and emotional senses they invoke are very strong. Intuitive interpretations always need to be offered tentatively, and need to ring true with their recipient. In our view, this is one of the great strengths of intersubjective exploration – we can test out our intuitions with each other. Of course, as we noted before, there is always the possibility of collusion in this testing. This is where external supervision, the touchstone of wider nature, and the validity procedures already described offer vital protection.

Finally, to return to our earlier assertion that the aims of ecopsychology research must be grounded in social action: we would agree strongly with Braud (1997) that, “The criterion for acceptability of a knowledge claim is the fruitfulness of its implementation” (p. 162). This resonates with Maxwell's (2002) observation that, by expurgating values from science, and concentrating on “facts”, positivism has left researchers powerless to determine the use to which their discoveries will be put: it has “neurotically” denied the place of research in the political sphere. Maxwell calls for an “intellectual revolution” to free academic enquiry from its neurosis, and argues that:

... the fundamental intellectual and social aim of academic enquiry... ought to be to promote wisdom, where wisdom is defined as the capacity to realise what is of value in life, for oneself and others (pp. 34-35).

Whilst Maxwell calls for personal and social action, as ecopsychologists we would extend this. We believe that the ultimate test of our work will be the activism it inspires in service of the earth.

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Appendix 1: The stages of the Heuristic Process and the role of the unconscious

Stage / Description	Unconscious – hindrance	Unconscious – help
<p>1. Initial engagement</p> <p>Discovery of a research question which has intense personal interest for the researcher.</p>	<p>Personal pain linked to the research project may shift the focus to something less threatening. An unconscious drive to resolve the painful question may persist, and split the focus.</p>	<p>Unfinished business or wounds in the researcher's personal life or culture may draw the researcher into passionate engagement with the research question</p>
<p>2. Immersion</p> <p>Intense focus on, and “living inside” the question.</p>	<p>If the research is not central to the researcher's concerns, and has been undertaken, for example to fulfil institutional or organisational requirements, immersion will not be possible, as the unconscious conflict between personal and organisational needs will sabotage the process.</p> <p>The researcher's own past experience may create unconscious distortions in the direction of focus.</p> <p>If the question is central to the researcher's concerns, its pull may be so strong that the researcher becomes submerged in the process.</p>	<p>Opening to the research question as a vocation – a call from the depths of the unconscious can provide powerful energy to deepen the immersion process. This requires a supportive and nurturing institutional and personal environment, and a sense that it is safe to surrender to this process.</p>

<p>3. Incubation</p> <p>Retreat from the question.</p>	<p>Researchers may fear that if they retreat from the question, they will lose motivation and fail to complete their research. The sense of meaning, completeness and life given by engagement with the question may make it hard to pull away. There may be a painful sense of loss on withdrawing from this depth of engagement.</p>	<p>The unconscious may make it obvious that a time of rest and letting go is needed. For example, ideas may dry up for a while. There may be a sense of flatness or closing down.</p>
<p>4. Illumination</p> <p>Naturally occurring intuitive insight and spontaneous elucidation of the phenomenon.</p>	<p>If previous stages are incomplete or not wholehearted, illumination will not occur.</p>	<p>Knowledge of the dynamic of the unconscious, and a willingness to open to mystery can allow new understandings to emerge.</p>
<p>5. Explication</p> <p>Full examination of what has emerged into consciousness in the previous stage.</p>	<p>If the major source of data is not personal, but is focussed outside on the experience of others, the phenomenon cannot be felt from the inside, and therefore cannot be authentically explored in the researcher's own subjectivity.</p> <p>The researcher's own past experience may act as a "chaotic attractor" for particular interpretations.</p>	<p>If the unconscious is allowed to move freely through the researcher into the explication, the researcher may experience a sense of "a resonance so harmonious that it would be.... hard to say who is writing and who is being written" (Romanyshyn, 2007: 17).</p>
<p>6. Creative synthesis</p> <p>Holistic expression of conclusions</p>	<p>If the researcher is lacking in self confidence, or has previous trauma surrounding creative expression, the full unfolding of the final phase may be choked.</p>	<p>Opening to the unconscious can allow free flow of creative expression.</p>