

Where Gestalt and Qualitative Research Merge: A heuristic inquiry into mothers' experiences in stepfamilies

Abstract

Using six stages of Heuristic Inquiry (Moustakas, 1990) as the structural outline, this article is a partial account of the author's research journey as a Gestalt practitioner working on a doctorate at Metanoia Institute. It includes an extract from the author's research journal and excerpts from the doctoral findings. The doctorate focuses on stepfamily relationships through the experiences of mothers and includes personal material alongside the narratives of other women. Some of the findings are included here. The author touches on fears and insecurities around learning and issues of identity that she encountered through the process of researching. In the course of learning about qualitative research the author found many methodologies that share the same philosophical and ontological roots as Gestalt therapy and drew from these to create a mixed methodology. Thus this writing highlights a fuzzy boundary between the practice of psychotherapy and qualitative research where the practice of Gestalt in the therapy room might be thought of as a form of heuristic research with the therapist supporting the self investigation of her client in the context of their relationship.

Key Words: Heuristic Inquiry, qualitative research, stepfamilies, mothers, narrative, identity, self in research.

Introduction

The root meaning of heuristic comes from the Greek word heuriskein, meaning to discover or find. It refers to a process of internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience and develops methods and procedures for further investigation or analysis. The self of the researcher is present throughout the process andthe researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and knowledge. Heuristic processes incorporate creative self-processes and self-discoveries (Moustakas, 1994).

The project that this writing refers to is titled 'Narratives of Mothers in Stepfamily Situations; an Explorative Investigation'. The research is based on interviews with 11 women (including myself) who all raised their children in stepfamily situations. The interviews were edited in consultation with each participant to create first person narratives and taken through a number of processes, through which I aimed to gain a felt sense of participant's experiences and to find themes in common.

For this article I present my work as a heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1981) or journey of discovery (Finlay and Evans, 2009, p3). As Barber writes:

In heuristic inquiry, autobiographical and 'meditative' reflections come especially to the fore (Douglas & Moustakas 1984) as the researcher questions 'What is my experience of this phenomenon?' and 'What is the essential experience of others who share a similar experience to my own?' Indeed the researcher's effort to travel ever deeper into his/her inner experiencing of a specific theme surrenders him/her to an experiential journey sign-posted by six interrelating phases (Barber, 2006, p78).

The research journey was my primary research method and it encompassed the various activities and events that contributed to the final work (Moustakas, 1981; 1990; Barber, 2002, p78). As a

researcher I used my whole self, mind body and emotions, as a crucible for digesting and making sense of information. I recorded the journey in a journal that I kept up with sporadically and in which I wrote anything that connected with the research; flows of consciousness, feelings, ideas and themes, dreams, snippets of overheard conversation, lists and notes taken during seminars and meetings.

It can be seen from the above descriptions that processes of heuristic inquiry might be familiar to Gestaltists who practice self inquiry as they work to make sense of their client's world. I have taken six stages of heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990; 1994; listed in Barber, 2006) to structure this writing¹.

Stage 1 Initial Engagement

What to research and how to go about it

The researcher immerses his/herself in a deep personal questioning of what precisely he/she wishes to research, in order to discover and awaken an intense interest, relationship and passion in the research subject (Barber, 2006 p78).

I start this section by moving away from myself to provide a brief introduction to the phenomenon of contemporary stepfamilies; my research area. I then return to a personal account and the start of my research journey where my motivations for doing a doctorate were primarily in order to write and extend the potential of my Gestalt practice. In the final part of this section I briefly describe my research methodology which combined several methods that link with aspects of Gestalt theory.

About stepfamilies

Over the last 50 years the number of people living in stepfamilies has rapidly increased so that whereas in the past they were a rarity and usually caused by the death of a parent, today they are fairly common and most often caused by the separation or divorce of parents. Contemporary stepfamilies, where it is usual for both biological parents to be alive but living separately often throw up considerable challenges for many of the people that live in them and often, as was the case for me, these are unexpected.

Stepfamily structures involve adults in parental roles with children who are not their own. They have different relational dynamics from those families where every member is biologically related as within stepfamilies there are often several different biological groups and these form strong sub-groups with differing histories and cultures.

I have found that many people associate stepfamilies with the figure of the wicked stepmother who is found in folk tales and fairy stories worldwide. In these tales usually the mother has died and is idealised as loving and good. The stepmother has married the father, and she pushes out or mistreats the children. As with many myths these stories highlight fundamental truths. Stepmothers can be both rejected and rejecting as they may be perceived by their stepchildren as an intruding outsider. Children tend to want their parents to be together and fantasise that the stepparent is stopping this. They may feel disloyal to their mother if they form a relationship with this other woman. From their side a stepmother is likely to be primarily interested in the father

¹ Moustakas identified six stages of heuristic research which are Initial engagement, immersion into the topic and question, incubation, illumination, explication and culmination of the research in a creative synthesis. (1990 in Moustakas 1994). Barber has listed them in his book *Becoming a Practitioner Researcher* and this is what I have used here.

not his children. Such situations can evoke hostile feelings in both stepmother and stepchildren, contributing to the perception of stepmother as 'evil'.

Stepmother issues are an example of the contribution biology makes to difficulties that arise in stepfamilies. Knowledge of problems experienced by stepparents is more widespread than the conflicts that might be experienced by biological parents in stepfamilies. The idea of differences between how people feel towards biological and non biological members of their stepfamilies as a crucial factor in their relational dynamics was the underlying assumption from which I began my research.

Research Focus

When in 2002 I applied to Metanoia Institute for a place on their doctoral programme my initial motivation was to understand more about why I do what I do as a therapist and to be able to write and talk about it. At that stage I did not know what I wanted to research for my project the criterion for which was that it should be relevant for psychotherapy practice. I was pulled towards two possibilities; comparing development as a musician with self-development in psychotherapy or something around stepfamilies. I had experience in both and didn't like having to choose; as existentialists note, freedom of choice involves regret and guilt for the lost potential in paths not taken (Yalom, 1980 in; Cooper, 2003). However of these two possibilities, exploring the area of stepfamilies looked more generally applicable as an aspect of societal change that involves many people; clients and therapists alike.

My awareness of stepfamily issues started with my own family. Following separation and divorce from my children's father, I began a relationship with a man who had a son of his own. My children didn't immediately accept my new partner and I found myself pulled between their complaints, my new partner and my wish for things to run smoothly. Despite myself I felt resentful of my stepson who seemed to disrupt things when he came to stay with us, seemed to be treated specially by his father and took up his attention. Furthermore he had different ways of doing things and for example liked ketchup, chips and cola while I cooked whole-foods. My stepfamily situation evoked intensely painful emotions in me and I found very little practical guidance available as a support.

After I completed my Gestalt training I worked on a stepfamily helpline² and found many others experiencing difficulties in their stepfamily situations. I became inspired to offer therapeutic support in that area and have developed this over many years. Thus I have worked with individuals and couples from stepfamily situations, run groups focused on stepfamily issues, put on many workshops at conferences and have written several articles and co-written a book on the subject.

The questions that underlay my research arose from both professional and personal perspectives. As a therapist I wanted to know more about how people's experiences in stepfamily situations were structured – what was helpful to them and what caused problems, as a guide to therapy work with them. From a personal viewpoint I wondered whether other women in similar situations felt the same as I did and how their situations resolved in the present day - if they did. Thus I was seeking understanding and resolution for personal issues as well as knowledge that would be useful in the psychotherapy field.

While I am both a mother and stepmother it was as a mother when my children were young that I felt most challenged; I felt that the stepfamily situation got in the way of my relationship with my children. I found that the experiences of *biological* parents in stepfamilies (mothers and fathers)

² Counselling Helpline for National Stepfamily Association – now Parentline Plus

were underrepresented in existing research and literature. Therefore I chose to explore the experiences of *mothers* who, like myself had raised their children in stepfamily situations (henceforward stepfamily mothers). This focus enabled me to include myself as a research participant so that I could contribute my own material to the study.

Methodology

For faith is knowing beyond awareness that if one takes a step there will be ground underfoot: one gives oneself unhesitatingly to the act, one has faith that the background will produce the means. (Perls, Hefferline et al., 1951, p343)

As I have described, my research was a query into women's experiences as mothers in stepfamilies. I viewed research as an extension of therapeutic practice in that I intended to use myself in relationship with participants in order to learn about their worlds. I therefore found myself needing to distinguish between psychotherapy and qualitative research. I identified that a key difference between the two areas is in who the outcomes are intended for. Qualitative research outcomes at a doctoral level are available publicly and aim to benefit and influence the wider world whereas psychotherapy practice is most commonly a private affair conducted behind closed doors for the primary benefit of the client.

I found that Gestalt theory belongs to a broad strand of thinking with roots in Phenomenology, Existentialism and Kurt Lewin's field theory. Because of this many qualitative research methodologies are compatible with Gestalt thinking and are key in researching human experience in a variety of fields (See Barber, 2006 for a thorough exploration of the connection between Gestalt and qualitative research). For my exploration I drew from several of these in a mixed methodology which suited my exploration and inclinations.

As a creative researcher I intentionally allowed my interest and inspiration to lead me so that the research path unfolded in front of me as I went, like Dorothy's yellow brick road in the Wizard of Oz. While such a method fuelled my energy and excitement it was nearly my downfall when I was faced with pulling together a mass of disparate material. I would like to say that a figure finally emerged from the undifferentiated field in a magical 'aha' moment, but the truth is that I was forced by time constraints to commit to a focus in the writing and that doing so was scary.

Stage Two - Immersion

Interview Design

The researcher begins to live, sleep, dream and merge with the research question to the extent that he/she becomes it, so as to appreciate its intimate effects from the inside (Barber, 2006 p78).

Immersion is a process of diving into the research area and becoming saturated with the material or data in thought and action; allowing it be an obsession and reverie. For me this stage lasted for the duration of conducting the research and I lived, breathed and slept ruminating on mothers and stepfamilies. Writing from within this fascination I wove the story of my own experience with the accounts of others and reflected on my process in the manner Etherington calls 'reflexive' (Etherington, 2004) There is not space here to introduce all the activities that contributed to my work, instead I describe my interview method, which was important as a means of facilitating depth in the telling of life experience.

The interviews I conducted were an adaptation of 'open interviews' (Moustakas, 1981); i.e. interviews which are loosely structured so that a participant can freely express themselves rather

than be constrained by a series of questions. Having provided the frame of *mothering* in stepfamily situations I saw it to be important that as far as possible participant's interests (rather than mine) should lead the conversation. Thus each participant was informed of the focus of at an earlier meeting while during the interview itself I asked only two set questions: at the beginning I asked who was in the participant's family and at the end, what it had been like to talk about this. Within this framework was the space for participants to talk about what came forward for them. As an interviewer I was able to use my psychotherapy skills to follow and deepen the participant's narratives.

Before embarking on interviews with other women, I tested out my proposed interview method by asking a friend and colleague (Debbie Friedman) to interview me. I found that my interview guidelines supported by my familiarity with Debbie and her skills of enquiry led me to become powerfully in touch with my experiences as a stepfamily mother and to think about aspects of myself that I had not previously considered. At this point I bring in my own words from the interview (edited for fluency) to give a flavour of this;

...there are so many different elements to my experience; they include my own history, and that of my own family and things about myself, and my level of maturity, neuroses and difficulties and personal development so that's one thing contributing. Another thing contributing is how I feel - not necessarily think- a woman and a mother is and a woman and a mother does; those assumptions that I've taken in and are so embedded that I can hardly see them.

I think that a really strong theme for me is the dynamic between doing things for myself and being a mother. I'm not sure that they are incompatible but they're only compatible if there's a lot of support I think. If there's not a lot of support then it's about juggling things – doing an awful lot of things with one body, but things that don't necessarily fit, not being able to so easily manage them. If there's someone there to take the weight it might be they'd do something some time, I'd do something another time you could oscillate but without that person there then it's all held (you know); I'm saying it was all held within me. I was doing everything (Asherson Bartram, 2009).

This extract shows me putting together thoughts that I had not expressed before and reaching new understandings of myself. The idea of a dynamic between what I felt were the tasks of mothering and my need for things that were for myself as a woman in my own right stayed with me as I listened to other women and I found that this was a relevant issue for all of them. Thus through being interviewed myself I immersed myself in my own material, gained a broader sense of what was important for me as a stepfamily mother and through my own experiences connected with mothers as a whole.

There is a clear similarity to what took place between me and participants in the interviews and some aspects of relating in the therapy room. As is the case between client and therapist the interviews were an encounter between me and the participants – a shared experience and meeting rather than a series of questions. In these meetings I explored and learned about participants' experiences *with* them and we were able to reflect together on the meaning of what they were saying. Each conversation was a unique happening and belonged to a specific time and place, with a particular participant being interviewed by me. Another interview with another researcher in another spatial and temporal environment would have been entirely different. Because of this collaboration the transcribed narratives that came out of these interviews are a co-creation between myself and the participants. As such they are neither neutral or objective but are akin to a work of art that has the potential to be evocative and to resonate with truthfulness of expression.

Stages three and four– Incubation and Illumination

Incubation

The researcher reviews all of the data acquired from his/her experience and that of co-researchers, in order to identify tacit hidden meanings and an integrating framework that might be further tested and refined until it forms a comprehensive fit with experience (Barber, 2006 p78).

Illumination

The researcher allows the inner workings of intuition to clarify and extend his/her understanding of the question, while awaiting the tacit knowing that percolates to consciousness from a deep well of subconscious inner experience (ibid).

I have put Incubation and Illumination together as I found that I did not follow a series of clear stages while doing the work. Instead my understanding arose seamlessly out of my confusion and I had a sense of things coming together; like making scrambled egg, when the liquid mixture begins to coagulate in increasingly larger clumps, until the dish is cooked

Getting Stuck and Shifting Identity

Issues of identity are key to the processes of finding personal authenticity. In *Gestalt Therapy Now* Perls talked about layers of identity, where we behave as *if* we are something. “It is always the *as if* attitudes that require we live up to a concept, live up to a fantasy that we or others have created” (Perls, 1970, p21). He described a process of giving up phony aspects of self and passing through a deadness into an explosion of feeling and liveliness (ibid,p22). I find these concepts pertinent to processes that took place during the course of my doctoral project.

While writing up my research, I became aware of and reviewed aspects of how I was identifying myself or who I was writing as. At the start I was writing ‘as if’ I was a Gestalt therapist attempting to fit my working to a gestalt framework. However there came a time when this stopped working and I could no longer fit my thinking into a Gestalt frame as I conceived it. I found myself at an impasse (ibid, p23) where I did not know if what I was doing was Gestalt, or what it was. At this time I felt very upset and no longer knew how to proceed. Avenues seemed lifeless and uninteresting and my inspiration and writing were not flowing.

The explosion when it came was through a reconnection with my identity as woman or mother, which was inspired by coming across *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy et al., 1986) a book which provided a perspective on feminine ways of knowing. For me it was a profound recognition that being a woman and mother had shaped not only how I approached research but every aspect of my life. The fact of my womanhood came before my being a Gestalt therapist both historically and in my own sense of self. Doing this research therefore led me to the authentic ground of my womanhood. Through identifying my womanliness I was able to connect with my research participants, whereas relating most strongly through the identity of Gestalt therapist separated me from them. As authenticity is a strong value for Gestaltists there is an irony in this.

In order to present a more lively account of the above I include here some of the relevant section from my research journal.

I am becoming increasingly aware of stepfamily situations in everyday life. Stepfamily situations seem to be everywhere! As far as heuristic research goes, does this belong to immersion, or illumination or are these stages all happening at the same time? I feel on a rollercoaster. Nothing is clear.

I am writing, but feel as if I'm writing for a panel of severely rigorous academics, who will call me to account for every word, thought and suggestion. I am so bothered by the idea of this impending judgement, that each word feels squeezed out of me. I spend hours putting down a word, crossing it out and restarting, then getting distracted by an email. I am suffering from the writers curse, and what is actually coming out seems rather dead. In desperation I start to read more. I come across Women's Ways of Knowing. Illumination strikes me. I am so relieved. Of course, I am thinking like a woman; I have been desperately trying not to be myself, to impress an imaginary someone who appears to be a rather strict version of my father. I've also been trying to fit everything into a Gestalt framework and it hasn't been working; it's too complicated. Everything is falling into place.

Now I start to put the material together in different ways. I have made a big chart of all the participants and put it up on my wall. I return to the interviews and once again work on trying to feel the essence of each woman I have interviewed and writing it up. I stop waiting for some magical focus to emerge, and decide to put down themes that make sense to me. I feel that I know something about each of these women well. I also have an increased sense of myself as mother. I am beginning to be aware of mothers and mothering in my therapy work. (Asherson Bartram, 2009, pp62-63).

The above extract as well as describing a stage in my journey, shows how I became stuck, the thoughts and feelings that accompanied this and a shift in how I identified myself. As I remember it, this shift freed me up to write and complete my work.

Stage 5 – Explication

Recognising research as a developmental process and bringing together the threads.

The researcher attempts to examine fully what has awakened in consciousness, in an attempt to familiarise him/herself with the layers of meaning that surround the phenomenon being studied, inclusive of its universal qualities and deeper meanings so as to create an appreciation of its phenomenological whole (Barber, 2006 p78).

Making sense of the research material took place over a long period of time and it was through writing that I brought it together. Feedback from supervisors was invaluable here. I learnt to recover from dipping into a despondent 'I can't do it' when reading an honest criticism so that I could use the support and information that such comments offered. The ability to appreciate and accept criticism continues to be a valuable asset.

In order to show some of how I presented material I include here two adapted extracts from my final document. These show me using my own voice together with the voices of other women in an exploration of my findings. I follow this with a summary from the outcomes of two important findings. I have chosen themes that are especially pertinent to the experiences of mothers in stepfamily situations and therefore to stepfamilies as a whole.

The Minute Children were Born (Asherson Bartram, 2009, pp133-134)

Out of eleven women interviewed, nine including myself described what happened to them either when their child was born or in the early years of their child's life. Here each woman expresses a different set of feelings in relation to their child. These feelings are strong and immediate.

From the minute they were born I took full responsibility. Like they were to do with me, they were mine. I'm saying that "they're mine" is the feeling I had from the minute they were there somehow. It's like something kicked in when they were born. (Claire)

The minute they are born they gain independence and you are losing them in a sense. That's how it feels for me. Being a mother is like one long experience of loss. You just lose them. (Esther)

They don't actually need anyone but you in those early months and that's extremely intense. In the early years they feel a bit like you. My memory of the first couple of years is of this very intense physical experience of attending to his physical need, the breast-feeding, the cuddles, the intimacy. (Elaine)

I felt it was an incredible responsibility to be a parent – or to be a mother. That came first. It wasn't a burden it was like the main... (Bella)

I'd never held a baby till I held Andy literally. I didn't know what to do. I was just overwhelmed by this whole mothering thing. (Clody)

I just entered this bubble of being in love with this baby, and she was such an easy baby. (Robin)

In these accounts of what it feels like to be a mother at the beginning of their child's life each woman described a unique relationship with her baby that involved strong feelings and responses. It seems that with the birth of their child each woman was transformed and from being a pregnant woman she became a mother and baby couple (Winnicott, 1986) with her baby existing outside of her in a dependent state.

Feelings Towards Stepchildren (Asherson Bartram, 2009, pp139-141)

In this extract four women describe relationships with their stepchildren as being less connected and intimate than those with their own children.

I always saw them (stepsons) as very different to me. In that sense you are very bound up with your own child whereas my stepsons were always different individuals. They were always very polite and reserved. Quite rightly they had their boundaries. (Elaine)

My own perception was that my stepson wouldn't have wanted me close to him as well as that I didn't feel close. I did motherly things for my stepson but he wouldn't have wanted me physically close to him for example. (Claire)

If they'd been my own children I wouldn't have wanted to embark on three and a half years of back to back shift work and stuff. When you've got your own child there's something about wanting to spend as much time with them as possible. (Robin)

I can't imagine being fonder of a stepchild than I am of my own blood children, but we've rubbed along alright. (Leanne)

Overall the difference between how the women felt towards their stepchildren compared with their own children was that there seemed to be more separation and less intense emotional involvement – a sense of people getting to know each other, rather than belonging to each other. This meant that as stepmothers there was the potential of being a supportive adult or mentor without the complications of the more identified and enmeshed aspects of the mothering role (ibid, p141).

Findings - Stepfamily Dynamics

From the overall findings of the doctorate (ibid pp95-167) I have extracted two findings to present

in this paper. These provide some insight into what therapists need to know in order to support people in stepfamily situations.

Within stepfamily situations are different groups and subgroups based on biology which can bring about strong emotions as people deal with issues such as loyalty and territory. Where people perceive themselves as being connected through genes there is often a sense of something physical and unbreakable being passed on. There can frequently be found a primitive visceral quality to the character of biological relationships which is countered by a rejection or difficulty in assimilating people who do not have the biological connection into a family group. In the case of mothers, their children have literally developed within their bodies and they (mothers) often relate to them with a fiercely protective attachment.

While most of the women I interviewed described an intense connection with their own children that started at birth connections with stepchildren were less close and secure. Step-relationships it seems are more vulnerable than biological relationships for example if a stepfamily couples separates it is rare for the stepparent to be able to maintain a relationship with their stepchildren. People often feel that they are bad for how they feel towards their stepchildren however a more distant relationship towards them seems to be normal. This is not necessarily unloving but a different type of love than that felt towards own children. Therefore it is important for therapists to hold an acceptance of relationships as they are and to inform people that what they feel is not dysfunctional but an aspect of stepfamily dynamics.

Overall people seem to relate differently with those to whom they are biologically than to those with whom they are not and these differences provide a challenge to consolidating stepfamily groups.

Stage 6 – Creative Synthesis

The researcher attempts to examine fully what has awakened in consciousness, in an attempt to familiarise him/herself with the layers of meaning that surround the phenomenon being studied, inclusive of its universal qualities and deeper meanings so as to create an appreciation of its phenomenological whole (Barber, 2006 p78).

Final Words

From its inception doing the doctoral venture involved a personal process – a journey which was the essence of the research. This was at times difficult and painful and it only came together at the last minute by supreme effort and a month of getting up at five in the morning.

The synthesis – the whole – was a combination of insight into stepfamily mothers and stepfamilies as well as a personal transformation. The very imagination of taking on a doctoral project was the beginning of a process of self-change. I changed from someone for whom the thought of taking on a doctoral project seemed ambitious, to someone who *might* work on a doctorate with the possibility of inhabiting the title of doctor, to someone who had achieved it. The research venture also involved taking a deeper look at how I was identifying with Gestalt and the strengths and limitations of that thereby.

As well as personal change, my work as a therapist has changed. I have become sensitised to the feelings of women and mothers and more involved in working with and thinking about stepfamilies. I have co-founded an organisation ‘StepIn ASAP; Advancing Stepfamily Awareness in Practice’. This is a group of therapists from a variety of orientations including Gestalt, most of

whom have a personal connection with stepfamilies. Together we explore stepfamily situations in our practices and lives using role play as a means of bringing them to life.

I have extended my work as a psychotherapist and am now also teaching, training and supervising research projects and dissertations. I am keen to support people in bringing themselves into their research. My project has shown me that personal experience offers an inside view on many issues and this self-reporting and reflexive examination is valued within Gestalt and other humanistic therapy traditions.

With the benefit of hindsight, were I to take on a further project I would be less determined to follow my intuition, and consider more carefully a structured approach. While I value creativity in myself and others, my approach left me at times, floundering and unsupported. I would also want to be more clearly directed towards psychotherapy practice in my questions as I felt that the personal questions I asked might have been more focused if they were grounded in actual therapy work. Nevertheless the project has highlighted important qualities of different relationships within stepfamilies that provide a perspective from which practice can be based.

Ultimately I created a piece of work that is creative as well as academic and which is based on collaboration and co-creation – working with – rather than observing, together with self-exploration. My approach to research led an examiner to say of my project ‘that its exploration of the influences of professional perspectives on the researcher’s approach and mode of investigation.....throws light on the concept of practitioner-researcher’ (Portwood, 2009). I am proud of this and hope that this writing encourages others to take on projects of their own.

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