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Evocative cues and presence: relational consciousness within qualitative research

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This paper introduces an example of how pictures were used to facilitate exploration of spiritual aspects of self, as a basis for qualitative research, with young people aged 15–18 years. The author considers how spiritually moving and stirring experiences may be related to the notion of a direct, participatory embodied attunement to the world. Contemporary approaches in psychotherapy emphasise the significance of right brain structures in accessing deeper senses of self. It is suggested that the role of the researcher/interviewer is highly significant in creating an appropriate way of being present that is conducive to the subjects evocation of spiritual states of being. From both perspectives, the definition by David Hay and Rebecca Nye of spirituality as ‘relational consciousness’ may have further concrete and direct implications for how qualitative research is fostered in this area.

Keywords: Qualitative; Relational consciousness; Presence; Evocative cues

Photographs

A workshop format was created for a group of young people, aged between 15 and 18 years, to reflect on their sense of life and direction as an inner journey (see Appendix). A range of pictures was offered from which the instruction was to select any that resonated with them in some way without prior interpretation or analysis. The pictures were mainly photographs and included landscapes, aspects of nature, light and shadow, images of people in different situations, permutations of ages and groupings, different expressions on faces; some were contemporary images of war, conflict, impact of environmental disasters, and so on. Each young person moved around the room and gathered a range of pictures fairly spontaneously. From these, they could reflect and share what the pictures meant to them. The themes that emerged from

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these six individuals included that of one person who had chosen images focusing on conventional magazine beauty, with other pictures of nature. She related this to her struggle to relate at a deeper more soulful rather than superficial level among female peers; one youth chose a woman prostrate on the ground in the aftermath of the Tsunami as a profound image of the depth of human expression of suffering, another person chose some beautiful pictures of nature which were related to the deep sense of connection with nature. One other chose an image of very brightly coloured dyes, which he identified with his sense of his way of being and his way of being different. Many other different kinds of qualities and meanings were constellated in this way, which led to a shared, participative reflection on more profound levels of shared, spiritually imbued human experiencing among us.

The use of evocative cues in facilitating research with children and young people is evidently well established. For example, Jeanne Broadbent (2004) describes a project involving creative dance with primary school children, as a way of exploring spiritual themes of creation within a more embodied and accessible form. Daniel Scott (2004), in the same issue of the *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality*, also describes how he has interpreted stories gathered from children and adolescents to trace spirituality in the shape of narrative formation. As David Hay has pointed out (2001), every aspect of the curriculum can be utilised to explore spirituality. He describes also a research project with photographs with children who were shown images of solitary figures expressing core aspects of spirituality—‘awareness of the here and now’, ‘awareness of mystery’, and ‘awareness of value’, which were identified by himself and fellow researcher Rebecca Nye in their groundbreaking research project (Hay & Nye, 1998).

While it is evident that spiritual experience is more successfully communicated through art and creative expression, it may also be worth considering how it comes about that these affective, somatic, and imaginal domains of experience are linked within our deepest senses of self and meaning. Spiritual experience is often referred to in kinaesthetic terms—a numinous experience is said to be moving, stirring, causing shaking, and so on. It seems to indicate a connection between deep reverberation at a bodily, affective level with profound meaning, a sense of being wholly or completely touched. Thus, there is a sense of an inter-relational feeling field which holds more evocative or intense power than everyday moments of contact usually do. Hay and Nye’s (1998) conception of relational consciousness is highly relevant here, but I am also interested in how the physical/affective sense of depth/stirring/profundity is evoked in spiritual experience. Simply by offering photographs of the world in arrested moments caught by a camera, we are offering a relational field of consciousness in which to find one’s self. Yet for each person, something touches the sense of being alive and present and affected in a unique way. Carl Jung would suggest that the collective domain of archetypal themes is conveyed to us personally through our individual complex—twisted strands of meaning that hold within their core the characteristic, profound archetypal intensity of affect which could relate to universal themes, such as birth, death, mystery, and soul/self.

Increasingly within the field of psychotherapy, it is recognised that many clients can only communicate inner states to us through an interactive and empathic field of
awareness. In our own ‘countertransference,’ which means to monitor the impact of another’s experience on our own somatic/affective state of being, we can discern many different bodily and affective qualities. When these are observed carefully and attended to with more consciousness, it is possible to find ways to convey them in images or some kind of shape or meaning. Such naming can assist the client to become more conscious and less stuck in an overwhelming sense of pain or global emotional complexity without words or form. It is like dwelling in a kind of chronic background atmosphere which the client has always inhabited, without knowing, since childhood.

Among psychotherapists, researchers in infant development, psychologists, and neuroscientists, it is proposed that the development of a sense of self begins from the earliest affective and bodily interactions with the carer (Stern, 1985). These deep origins of being remain accessible throughout life in art, contemplation, and the way we process new impressions in new situations. We now have a variety of new terms to specify this vague, non-conceptual aspect of our perception and cognition: pre-attentive awareness, implicit cognition, implicit procedural knowledge (in relation to how we engage in relating to others; Stern, 2004), the unthought known (Bollas, 1987), the felt sense (Gendlin, 1962), and so on. It is recognised that these domains are accessible within an intersubjective arena.

The embodied basis of mind

From the perspective of a current group of cognitive psychologists, linguists, and philosophers, such as Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1993), Johnson, (1987), and Lakoff and Johnson (1980), there is a need to re-situate the body in the mind and to argue for the bodily basis of meaning and imagination. Johnson (1987) argues the case for a non-propositional basis of meaning from image schemata that are derived from primary experiences of embodiment. For example, our primary experiences of bodily boundaries, of verticality, of force, or direction become part of our understanding of mathematical sets, of arguments, of logic and substance. In this sense, cognition is the direct embodied understanding of things, not a secondary process. The biologist/philosopher Susanne Langer (1979) anticipated this understanding in her assertion that all language and art is a way of expressing feeling. Therefore, within art, ‘presentational forms of knowing’ allow us to access complex inner feeling states by the evocation of bodily states—experiences of energy and flow in patterns and rhythms.

Allen Schore (2003), a neuroscientist and psychoanalyst, has now proposed that there are very clear links between infant development and the interactive attuned and relational dance between carer and infant, which create synchrony, emotional regulation, and potentially stimulus for the development of new neural pathways. All of these relational processes are located in the orbito-frontal cortex, which is involved with affective, pre-conceptual areas of experience and action intertwined with the emergence of a sense of self in relation to other. Schore goes so far as to propose that if psychotherapists are to be effective in their work with clients, it is vital for them to be able to connect with this domain of their own experiencing, in
connecting and attuning to clients. If the therapist only engages from a conceptual and verbal basis (located in the left side of the brain), they will not assist the client to symbolise difficult feelings or regulate intense and overwhelming feelings. He suggests that all psychotherapists need to meditate before they meet their clients. It is apparent that, if clients can find ways into working with dreams, art work, metaphors, image, bodily experience, and so on, there is always a shift in the sense of meaning and aliveness. In offering visual images to students, in structured exercises, the atmosphere always changes as students engage with more profound discoveries when they engage with such cues. From a Jungian perspective, archetypal images are related to intense affective correlates, which are intrinsically powerful and more global in implication.

**Daniel Stern and the non-verbal sense of self**

In watching dance, or listening to music, we can all attune to how meaning is conveyed through qualities of phrasing, intensity, rhythms, tonalities, and style. Daniel Stern (1985, 2004), a paediatrician and psychoanalyst, has turned to aesthetics to give him language to describe the development of a sense of self from infancy, from emergent and core senses of self, subjective and verbal senses. Each may unfold sequentially in the first two years of life, but thereafter they continue to be accessible in parallel modalities of being throughout our life. Thus we can evoke the qualities of the emergent sense of self when we come to a new country or climate, when we are exposed to new music or are in a kind of reverie, when impressions are still being organised into some coherent sense. Meanwhile the impressions are separated in interesting sensory, kinaesthetic, and multimodal cues that stimulate memories and images. The core state is linked to a more coherent bodily sense of self, which has some continuity and consistency. For Stern, and most other researchers who are looking at infant development, affect is seen as the primary organisation of self, as schemas in which motor, affective, sensory, and relational experiences are woven into representations of interactions that have been generalised. These schemes, rooted in bodily experience of self with others, become the base of language and thought. If we reflect on what seems most moving or meaningful to us, it seems to be something that has the capacity to ‘stir us to our depths!’, to resonate loudly, to touch our heart, and so on. We could even speculate as to whether our notion of ‘moving experiences’ itself requires us to access all four levels of the sense of self at one time right back to earliest bodily experiencing of aliveness.

**Presentational knowing**

Another way of thinking about this is to consider the ‘emergent aspect of self’ in terms of presentational forms of knowledge and to see how they reflect aspects of an innate attunement with the world, the inherent participation in perception. Varela et al. (1993) argue that in our direct experience we resonate with what is present to us and then perceptually enact the forms of its appearance.
In their paper, John Heron and Peter Reason (1997) propose the need for a participatory-inquiry paradigm within the field of qualitative research. They contrast ‘presentational knowing’, a term taken from the work of Susanne Langer (1979) with propositional or conceptual knowing and practical knowing, which is knowing how. Presentational knowing is grounded in our experience and manifests a direct resonance with the perceptual/sensory field expressed aesthetically in many different forms of metaphor. “These forms symbolise both our felt attunement with the world and the primary meaning embedded in our enactment of its appearing” (Heron & Reason, 1996). Jung might agree and add that such forms and resonant images also manifest archetypal affective elements.

David Abrams evokes in his extraordinary book *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996), the participatory nature of embodied perception in relation to our environment:

…it is all too easy for us to forget our carnal inherence in a more-than-human matrix of sensations and sensibilities. Our bodies have formed themselves in a delicate reciprocity with the manifold textures, sounds and shapes of an animate earth … our bodies have formed themselves. (Abrams, 1996, p. 22)

Our spontaneous experience of the world, charged with subjective, emotional and intuitive content, remains the vital and dark ground of all our objectivity. (Abrams, 1996, p. 34)

From this point of view, which counters a constructivist perspective, there is one that argues for the participatory immediacy and intertwining of experience and response in relation to world. This seems most particularly relevant to the field of research into childhood spirituality.

**The presence of the researcher**

If it is the case that in qualitative research focused on spiritual experience in children and young people, we are attempting to facilitate access to this kind of felt sense of participatory immediacy, there is also an implication for the researcher in his or her own quality of presence with the subject. We need to consider how our own state of being will impact on our subjects.

**Visual cues and presentation of findings**

Turning to the field of qualitative research into spirituality and the challenges of working with children and young people and with deeper affective layers of meaning, we find specific issues to consider that are unique to this. Spirituality is about deeply stirring and moving experiences. We know it has this kind of resonance, because it is as if we sense something from the entire array of our sentient capacity to feel and to know. It is more than we usually know of ourselves. These aspects of being moved, stirred, or even *quaking*, are core bodily metaphors. We are affected without knowing why. If these kinds of experiences are fundamental in our understanding of the ineffable and moving manifestations of spiritual experience, then to access them in research, the researcher needs to find the means to open deeper
levels of communication, which are conveyed in image rather than conceptual interpretation (which flattens such communication straight away). It is as if spiritual experience needs a bigger space in which to resonate or be received. However, interview questions are designed; the researcher may well communicate and may well need to communicate an openness and relational quality of enquiry that can allow precious, profound, or sacred personal experience to be shared—perhaps for the first time. A certain kind of affective, and more syncretic and soulful, field needs to be generated to allow for this.

Imagery and metaphor will be very important ways to communicate this domain of experience. ‘But the image has touched the depths before it stirs the surface’ (Bachelard, 1969, p. xix). From this perspective, we could consider such research is a kind of participation project for both researcher and subject, who are both held within a field of potential spirituality. While this field of meaning—mediated by imagery, affect, and metaphor—remains open to different conceptual terminology, it is shared between researcher and participant as a relational and embodied experience, as something known because it is felt.

The role of presence and quality of attention

There are many therapists who practice some kind of meditational discipline and who observe how qualities of attention and presence exert a profound impact on the client’s material and communication. Meditation facilitates a capacity to be in a spaciousness without form or knowing. It seems to facilitate a holding space. It is readily apparent to anyone involved in consistent one-to-one kinds of work that the way that we feel subtly changes the quality of lucidity, presence, aliveness, or availability to others, which can make a significant difference to the kinds of things clients will reveal or be able to feel. Similarly, in qualitative research on spirituality with both adults and young people, the quality of presence has a powerful effect on what can be shared or disclosed.

From all of these perspectives, it may be important to recognise the specific and particular demands for the qualitative researcher focusing on spiritual domains of experience in dialogue with others. Firstly, simply by engaging in the area, a radical opening is created which challenges the consensual reality of much of academic discourse; and for the subjects involved, a new intersubjective field is created for the disclosure of contentious and sensitive subjective experience. This is a unique aspect of research in this area and may be worth further reflection. Brendan Hyde (2005) has described the quality of this as ‘entering the space of mystery’ (lived space), a space of possibility.

Secondly, the nature of the material may require the researcher to draw on ‘analogic’ cues, such as images, metaphors, pictures, or other presentational sources of knowing, in order to facilitate evocation of spiritual experience.

To summarise, a good case can be made for using visual material which offers many different images of the world, as a stimulus to explore experientially how spiritually stirring meaning is derived and how these images can be linked with the deepest sense
of self/world. If spiritual researchers are to support such kinds of communication, then they may need to consider the project as a joint participatory venture in which their engagement is implicit in the way that they are listening, or the kind of presence and attention that is being offered to support deeper sharing. It will require a more affective and pre-conceptual mode of cognition and relation if we are to facilitate access to material that is known through feeling, image, and sensation rather than words. Thirdly, if the exercise is conducted within a group (and it does not have to be), the group can also share in reflecting on processes and meanings together. There are also further developments in the field of qualitative research which are moving into the domain of aesthetic forms, such as poetry, art, and performance for the presentation of material researched through qualitative enquiry. This is yet one further possibility from this form of research.

References

Appendix: structure of the workshop

1. Reflect on any story that you came across as child—perhaps in a book, on TV or as a film that affected you a lot. Consider if the theme of this story has resonated since in your life? Share with a partner or partners.

2. Take some time to view all the pictures. Allow one or more pictures to choose you. Take it/them away and allow some to contemplate what is evoked for you as you look at them and what they mean to you. Jot anything down on paper. Share with a partner.

3. Take one step further, and group your pictures together—Is there any way that they connect? Share again.

4. As a group, reflect on what you have got from this exercise. Allow a felt sense to form.