Heuristic Methodology in Arts-Based Inquiry of Autobiographical Therapeutic Performance

My intention is to present a framework for utilising autobiographical material as a performer, researcher and Dramatherapist. The framework offered is in response to concerns that performance and the theatrical art form are not central to research in Dramatherapy. It seems the arts profession often relies on the dominance of research approaches using the written word, some “do not yet see the links between artistic enquiry and formal research” (McNiff, 2013, p. 4). It is important that the arts therapists do not lose their identity as artists. The dramatic art form can empower Dramatherapist’s practice as artists and subvert the dominance of the written word in research.

The framework combines solo performance and professional development using autobiographical material. Yalom (2002) links personal and professional themes, suggesting where one is stuck personally, one is also stuck professionally. By exploring autobiographical material one becomes more aware of how personal material impacts on the therapeutic relationship. Research from autobiographical performance and theatre theory will illustrate how performance can explore obstacles to forming a relationship such as the audience or patient, and why play is important in this dynamic (Kumieha, 1987; Winnicott, 2005).

The framework is a synthesis of the artist, researcher and therapist and resonates with a/r/tography, a research methodology that acknowledges one’s role as an artist, researcher and teacher (Irwin, 2004, p.1). A/r/tography “does not seek to answer questions or offer linear procedures that culminate in conclusions” but is an on-going process of “active engagement” and “deeper understanding” (Kalin et al., 2009, p. 12 &13). Rowe (2003) explored playback theatre and the importance of a research methodology that resonates with the theatrical form. The proposed framework endeavours to offer a methodology that employs autobiographical performance, utilising the synthesis of artist, researcher and therapist.

A heuristic methodology is a helpful frame as “the heuristic process is autobiographical” because one is personally acquainted with the subject, that has “a social- and perhaps universal-significance” (Moustakas, 1990, p.15). The structure of the methodology also resonates with the frame and container of a story used in Dramatherapy that permits free,
playful and creative exploration. Heuristic Research helps to contain the chaotic processes of the artist, researcher and therapist but is flexible enough to permit experimentation within the framework (Trimingham, 2002).

Heuristic research is a qualitative research approach for understanding human experience and search for meaning, which is characteristically different to quantitative research that is concerned with measurement (Moustakas, 1994). The qualitative research view is that knowledge is created from meaning and “people’s subjective interpretations” of the social world (Matthews et al., 2010, p.28). Moustakas who uncovered the heuristic methodology explores its Greek roots in the word ‘heuriskein’ which means to discover or find (1990).

Heuristic research “explicitly acknowledges the involvement of the researcher, to the extent that lived experience of the researcher becomes the main focus of the research” (Hiles, 2001 http://psy.dmu.ac.uk/drhiles/HIpaper.htm). The focus on the sole researchers experience poses certain concerns. The use of research participants helps to address the potential disequilibrium to “help us avoid accusations of solipsism, self-indulgence, navel gazing or narcissism” (Etherington, 2004, p. 31). The involvement of participants, considered as co-researchers, take an active role to “achieve richer, deeper, more profound, and more varied meanings” in the research process (Moustakas, 1990, p.47; Haertl, 2014). The roles of others help the researcher filter their experience through co-researchers, so the researchers’ experience never stands alone (Etherington, 2004).

The framework explores key themes: The performer as artist and researcher; working with autobiographical and therapeutic material using metaphor; and the relationship between performer and audience representing a therapeutic alliance.

Moustakas suggests that heuristic research is about finding a question that needs illumination with a desire for understanding one’s own experience (1990). Moustakas identified the importance of entering into “dialogue with the phenomenon” and “being open and receptive to all aspects of one’s experience” (1990, p.16). Arts- based enquiry can be used to dialogue with the senses and experiences of the body, thus does not rely solely on verbal communication, but open to “body memories” or “other sensory modalities” (Panhofer et al., 2011, p.10). Tacit knowing gives “birth to the hunches and vague, formless insights that characterise heuristic discovery”, revealing some hidden aspect of the self (Moustakas, 1990; Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p.49). Within the dramatic arts the relationship dynamic with the audience can help magnify and intensity the tacit dimension. By using the intuition “one draws on clues” or “patterns” to bring more understanding to one’s experience (Moustakas, 1990, p.23). Curiosity drives artist endeavour. In the dramatic arts the performer wants to understand more fully a characters motivations. Indwelling is applying “unwavering attention”, “concentration” and “turning inward” to get below the surface of one’s more superficial experience (Moustakas, 1990, p. 24). By detailing aspects of the character, their costume and their jewellery the character is brought to life by making it more real (Stanislavski, 2013). The use of dramatic metaphor actively encourages turning
inward by externalising internal experience (Jones, 2007). By giving inner feelings, experiences and sensations an outward form it helps to make one’s subjective experience more objective and thus alleviate the potential dangers of being too inward looking (Franklin, 2013). According to Moustakas focussing requires “clearing an inward place” so one can tap into one’s thoughts in a “relaxed and receptive state” to achieve clarification (1990, p.25). By focussing on a physical sensation or a thought and examining one’s experience, one goes beyond one’s every day experience (Moustakas and Douglass, 1985). The internal frame of reference is informed by one’s experience, “one’s perceptions, thoughts, feelings and sense” (Moustakas, 1990, p.26). In this way one’s awareness is not bound in any way but open to the fullness of the human experience and interpretation. The involvement of co-researchers (director, supervisor and audience) helps to shed light on one’s experience by offering a new perspective. This process resonates with the supervision process, whereby the supervisor is able to hold a mirror up to the therapists experience to heighten awareness (Smith & Bird, 2014).

The six phases of heuristic research identified by Moustakas (1990) will illustrate the links between the methodology, artistic enquiry, autobiographical performance, personal and professional processes as a therapist. The phases show how the heuristic research frame has the potential to resonate with a therapeutic process and therapeutic theatre. Jones (1995) suggests that therapeutic theatre is a vehicle for exploration and re-exploration of a potential personal issue. Ethrington (2004) recognises how the research subject often has personal significance for the researcher, whether they are consciously or unconsciously aware of this. Moustakas and Douglass (1985) consider that the heuristic frame is a way of exploring “personal involvement in problem solving”. A heuristic framework thus has the potential to offer a therapeutic process that emphasises understanding and “know(ing) the essence of some aspect of life through the internal pathways of self” (p.39).

It is important to recognise that heuristic research “is not necessarily a linear process and certainly does not constitute a rigid framework”, as one can move backwards or forwards at any time in the different phases (West, 2001, p.129). The phases help to clarify the distinct features of heuristic research, but they should not be applied rigidly or mechanistically. The autobiographical performance below explores the devising process and my own solo performance in front of a public audience.

Initial engagement

Sela-Smith (2002) suggests that the research subject needs to be a passionate concern, or something that calls out to the researcher with a sense of un-ease. Forced Entertainment are a theatre company who devise their own shows from the impulses of play and storytelling. They often start their improvisations with an array of props, text or images as an impetus for their ‘play’, permitting themselves the freedom to explore and discover without a preconceived agenda for a show (Etchells, 1999). By improvising with objects in this manner, one is also exploring serious matters, as “play is inextricably involved in all
‘serious’ work” (Schechner, 1988, p.101). Play helps to uncover ‘passionate concerns’ and serious matters that may reflect autobiographical material and unconscious experiences that can lead to healing and mastery. Playing, devising and improvising can activate dormant experiences and one can learn from new discoveries that can be integrated into practice as a therapist (Emunah, 2015).

The devising of a recent autobiographical performance started with the dramatic image of a man standing on an empty stage. The image called out to me as having significant meaning. Isolation resonated as a possible passionate and existential concern that had possible autobiographic and therapeutic value. There was something about the challenge of being on an empty stage in front of an expectant audience that challenged me. There was certainly a degree of ‘un-ease’, perhaps even dis-ease. The ‘un-ease’ is dramatized as I enter the stage, dismayed that the props and the cast are missing. Left to carry the story on my own I apologise to the audience, aware that some in the audience may find it funny, entertaining or even tragic. Despite the challenging conditions and abandonment I pledge to the audience I will carry the drama on my own. The sense of responsibility felt real and frightening.

The heuristic approach resonates with arts based research, requiring risk taking, experimentation and discovery as well as “a willingness....to tolerate chaotic or unpredictable states” (Kosak, 2012, p. 21). Etchells (1999) suggests playing with one’s fears is important in the devising process, perhaps as a means to master some conflict from the past (Freud, 1993). There is an intuitive sense about following one’s instincts, suspending thought and surrendering to impulses of the unknown (Sela-Smith, 2002). The notion of artist as heuristic researcher keeps the tacit dimension active by sustaining a sense of mystery and the possibility of truths (Hillman, 1978).

Immersion

This is where the researcher lives the question daily, in both conscious and unconscious states; one is completely immersed in the question, one’s being is absorbed by the question (Sela-Smith, 2002). I wanted to explore the notion of isolation and abandonment. I have repeatedly had fearful dreams of being on stage in front of an audience and forgetting my lines. In the autobiographic drama I am left at the front of the church by a jilted lover as all the expectant guests look on. I rehearse and repeat the scene of abandonment again. The guests are all looking at me and they want answers. I flounder and try and find my voice. I am speechless and frozen. I am sweating. The theme of isolation appears again as I imagine myself as the abandoned Psyche tied to the tree. The image resonated with Christ on the cross and his final cry and torment of being abandoned by god. The use of dramatic metaphor’s and motif’s utilised in myth can also be interpreted in different ways, adding mystery to exploring autographic material masked in symbolism (Jung, 1995).
I immersed myself more fully into the scene, playing and replaying Psyche abandoned to the dark, cold and barren landscape. The use of a dramatic metaphor lent itself to constant search and discovery, because metaphors are not static, there meanings can be reinterpreted many times. Moments in the scene are intensified by focussing on units of action, such as Psyche’s shivers of excitement/fear, as she meets her fate (Stanislavski, 2013). Immersing oneself deeply with the internal frame of reference includes engaging the body, feelings and sensations (Moustakas, 1990), helping to elicit details from the devising process, making it more real. The cold hands, the chilblains and the scars from Psyche’s hands all act as data to inform the artist as researcher. By engaging the senses inherit in the dramatic image, helped to wake up my experience, intensify it and make it more accessible (Franklin, 2013). Being “specific” with the dramatic material helped to make it more real, immersing oneself deeper into the dramatic metaphor (Meisner & Longwell, 1987, p. 2). The rehearsal process is a constant work in progress and searching for understanding (Heilpern, 1999). The heuristic researcher is striving to go beyond the limits of one’s experience and knowledge, to extend ones awareness beyond the usual frontiers of knowing.

Incubation

Moustakas considered this phase was a retreat from the phenomena in order for the “inner tacit dimension to reach its full possibilities” (1990, p.28). This phase can be been seen in the arts. Mozart’s creativity often flourished whilst his gaze was on other activities (Bennett et al., 2004). You cannot force discovery, but by retreating away from the intensity of the research or artistic endeavour the researcher is creating the conditions required for discovery (Polyani, 1964; Djuraskovic & Arthur 2010).

In the devising process for autobiographical performance, the activation of the tacit dimension and the discovery of something new can happen in-between rehearsals. One might be washing up and quite unexpectedly new connections appear. Brook considered that “it is important just to wait….as...coincidences and doors open by themselves“ (1999, p. 114). By withdrawing new dimensions of the devising experience open up without prompting. I was aware that when I played out Psyche, tied to the tree, I always looked left stage. I imagined she was looking for the monster and wasn’t afraid. Then whilst drinking a cup of tea another meaning emerged. What if Psyche was avoiding looking at the audience? What if the audience was the monster and psyche didn’t want to face her fears. In the drama Psyche was a willing sacrifice, she didn’t fear death. Yet there was a disparity between an idea for the drama and what I actually experienced physically in the dramatic moment.

The realisation that the audience symbolically represented my fears was uncovered whilst engaged in another activity, proved to be a lynch pin in the autobiographical drama. New ideas can emerge spontaneously in another context without intent (Etchells, 1999). The devising process doesn’t stop when we exit the rehearsal space. Improvisation pushes
against the boundaries of our everyday world, against the boundaries of our story, where we discover insight and thus create new works (Sajnani, 2013).

Approaching a problem from the side using metaphor, rather than a more direct approach using speech, defines the arts therapies (Mitchell, 1998). The use of dramatic metaphor inherent in myth helps to turn the gaze away from the self and open up to the multiple interpretations permitted in the fictionalized realm. One is free to roam in an imaginary world beyond self-limiting beliefs, and open to the unknown.

Illumination

Moustakas considers Illumination as a “breakthrough moment” or an “awakening” that happens when one is “open and receptive to tacit knowledge and intuition” (1990, p.29). Acting first and thinking later keeps illumination and the tacit dimension alive. Staying with chaos keeps the playful state a living theatre, as opposed to a static theatre (Jennings, 1987; Brook, 2008) where illumination is dead. Illumination in the devising process requires one to trust the process without forcing connections (Jennings, 1987; Etchells, 1999).

Feedback from co-researchers illuminates the experience of the researcher through the use of critical others, intensifying and amplifying aspects of the performance and drawing out new experiences. Ethrington (2004) considered the involvement of a therapist in heuristic research important due to its autobiographical nature. The director, also a Dramatherapist, was able to bring both an artistic and therapeutic angle to the devising of an autobiographical performance. The director commented on the sadness of the wedding scene. Their feedback surprised me, illuminated my curiosity. I wanted to discover more about the scene and the dynamic with the expectant guests in their finery. The groom is swallowed in silence. The audience want an explanation. Where is the bride? The groom is frozen. He can’t move. Staying with the silence, the audience/wedding guests are all staring at me, recalling disappointment and unfulfilled expectation. Then the illumination- was this shame?

Feedback from others is vital, especially with heuristic research with the researcher is taking a central role in the research, as one can become too self-absorbed (Etherington, 2004). The director was able to notice sadness in the scene, something that was outside of my immediate experience that helped explore further. The involvement of critical others helps to retain an objectivity of one’s experience. Regular supervision and rehearsals with a director help to reduce the possibility of becoming too locked into subjective experience, broadening one’s experience.

The first public performance was in a bare medium sized space in front of a small intimate audience of ten people, consisting of members of the public, creative arts therapists and friends. I wanted to explore whether my autobiographical experiences had universal
resonance for the audience (Moustakas, 1990). Following the show some members of the audience offered written feedback of their experience of the performance through email.

Initially I was concerned the audience would not share my experiences, that I would feel alienated. Moustakas (1990) shared a similar concern when initially sharing his research and experiences of loneliness with others. It was essential to risk there not being a connection in order to hear the multiple voice of others who may have “conflicting positions” to the researcher emerge (Finley & Gough, 2003, p.12).

One audience member commented about the intimacy created between the performer and audience. They also commented on the bareness of the staging that helped create a vulnerability and facilitated their connection with the performance. I have often wondered whether I hide behind technique in my practice as a Dramatherapist, using Dramatherapy structures like masks to hide behind. My instinct from the beginning was to have no props, no lighting, no costume and no stage scenery. At times there was limited use of dramatic metaphor in the text, so I could not hide behind words. There was not rationale for this approach to the drama. I wanted to play with this un-ease that there was nowhere to hide.

The illumination was a gradual awakening and realisation that I have a tendency to hide behind achievements or status that became obstacles to intimacy. Perhaps I had doubted I was capable of the kind of intimacy required as a therapist. I felt exposed without stage scenery or props, but liberated and connected to the audience in an extraordinary way. I imagined Clarkson’s (1997) human to human connection, where the therapist and client transcend the roles they play in the therapeutic dynamic. By developing an awareness of one’s habits and conditioning one is able to enter into a deeper and more meaningful relationship dynamic (Grotowski, 2002; Kumiega, 1987). The empty space helped to dramatically intensify and illuminate fears, raising one’s awareness and create a new personal narrative (Bird, 2010). Smith and Bird (2014) explored how the creation of a metaphorical context in supervision can help the supervisee explore blocks and self-limiting beliefs that impact on the therapeutic alliance. In this way the relationship dynamic between self and other, between the performer and the audience becomes “the aim and the object of focus” (Finley & Gough, 2003, p. 8).

Explication

According to Moustakas the significant concepts in this phase are focussing and indwelling as one looks more closely, major themes are identified (1990). By exploring specific moments in the autobiographical performance the explication process helps to magnify themes that can have therapeutic potential. Ratnaguna (2010), a Buddhist practitioner, encourages writing exercises as a means to deepen one’s awareness and go beyond the boundaries of one’s everyday awareness. A similar approach could be applied in the devising process by focussing on a physical gesture, noticing changes in sensations of the body as the gesture is repeated (Moustakas, 1990). Focussing in this way resonates with the
work of Grotowski and digging deeper and deeper “within an infinitely narrow band of experience” (Mitter, 1992, p.133). I noticed Psyche had cord-marks on her wrists from her tied hands. Looking more closely at her freckled hands, her plain finger nails were clipped short and fine. She wanted her hands to look their finest for the monster. Details emerged as I noticed marks on her fingers where once were her precious rings. I was curious to discover that the rings had been removed by the crowd who escorted Psyche to the mountain top, abandoning her to her fate. They had fought over her rings, especially the large emerald ring. As Psyche I share my bare and unadorned hands to the audience. The hands are ordinary, without pre-tense. The details of the marks left by the rings, appeared at first as scars from an earlier life, then transformed into hands that could belong to a new story. The explication process illuminated new themes, enabling me to re-interpret and question the scene in a different way.

Creative Synthesis

Creative synthesis is the final phase that integrates meanings and themes, pulling them together to “create an accurate depiction of the experience” that could be in a “poem, story, drawing, painting or some other creative form” (Moustakas, 1990; Kenny, 2011, p.71, p.32).

New emotions started to inform the devising process. As I played out scenes, engaging more physicality, details of memories were uncovered (Stanislavski, 2013). Emerging experiences and needed shaping using theatre craft. The director offered ideas; ‘make it more physical, be more explicit, exaggerate the anxiety of being alone on stage and stay longer with feeling uncomfortable’. In the drama I played with the idea of abandonment again. Pacing backwards and forwards searching for the cast who had deserted the drama. I played with anxiety, awkwardness and embarrassment about being alone. There were long silences when I didn’t know what to say. When I didn’t know what to do. I wasn’t used to everyone looking at me. Normally the audience looks at Psyche. It wasn’t meant to be a one man show. Eventually I had to confront the audience and face the responsibility I was struggling to own. I would have to tell the story of Psyche and Cupid on my own. No one was going to rescue me. This moment was the first of many critical incidents that seemed to resonate in the drama, that of taking responsibility. It would be easy to blame the rest of the cast for abandoning me, but ultimately I needed to take ownership of the story.

The feedback from the director brings my experience into dialogue, helps me to be more aware of my un-ease, but also validates my experience. The dialogue between us became a creative synthesis as ideas were destroyed and reformed through the creative process. We were not only co-researchers but co-creators. Through playful collaboration we were able to sustain the constant creative synthesis and re-visioning of theatrical ideas by heightening themes and making them bigger or smaller so they resonated more clearly (Heilpern, 1999).
The sharing of an autobiographical performance, helped give up control of my experience and “follow the surprise of what is emerging”, as the devising process was a constant creative synthesis (Levine, 2013, p. 21). Co-researchers feedback helped with the reinvention of the improvisation process, by letting go of one dramatic idea for the creation of another.

I became aware of the emerging theme of playfulness in the drama between myself as performer and co-researchers that offered similar playful qualities inherent in the therapeutic alliance between a client and a therapist. Whilst directors, supervisors and audience members are not cast as therapists, their witnessing gives the autobiographical performance meaning, resonating with Jones (1995) core processes of dramatherapy. Other’s feedback of the drama offers new possibilities and transformation for being and another example of the ongoing creative synthesis phase and co-operative play.

The synthesis raised awareness of habits and conditioning in therapy practice and a tendency to hold too tightly to a client hypothesis. The heuristic process offer’s a methodology to help one to keep exploring and to hold each discovery lightly until the next discovery unfolds. This resonates with TS Eliot’s poem, “We shall not cease from exploration/And at the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time.” (1944). Moustakas recognised there was no end point in his exploration on loneliness, seeing it as a lifelong pursuit (Moustakas and Moustakas, 2004 p.72). Forced Entertainment’s theatre is never considered a finished product, but the company reach a point in their devising process where they perform to an audience (Etchells, 1999). Like the processes of theatre, therapy never finishes with the client. There’s a point where the client and therapist no longer meet together in the therapy space, but the therapist keeps reinterpreting the experience, because understanding is not static there is always something new to learn. I imagine when I preform the drama again, something new will emerge, because there is no end.

Conclusion

The chapter has explored the key concepts of the heuristic researcher and illustrated how the six phases of the heuristic methodology is suited to autobiographical performance. The importance of co-researchers and multi-faceted feedback as participants, directors, supervisor and audience to intensify aspects of the researcher/artists experience has been illustrated, to help elicit discovery, central to the heuristic methodology. Data from autobiographic performance has helped to illuminate aspects of the self as artist, researcher and therapist creating opportunities to heighten personal and professional relationship patterns.

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References


