Becoming a psychotherapist: exploring different temporalities of knowledge development in a professional training program

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Gilles Dieumegard, LIRDEF (EA 3749), Univ. Montpellier (gilles.dieumegard@umontpellier.fr)

Abstract

We study lived experience of individuals in learning situations, and generally proceed with a fine grained analysis of their understanding for time stretch lasting few tens of minutes. However, learning is not only a short term process. Therefore, we endeavour an empirical study in order to articulate two methods based on the same enactivist framework: the "course of action method" allowing to describe short-term dynamics, and the "life course of a practice method", investigating lived experience during longer time spans.

We are carrying out our study in a two years professional training program in psychotherapy, consisting in monthly seminars. We investigate the experience of three participants of a nine-person group. Re-situative interviews, in which participants are asked to retrieve and evoke their experience during the different moments of the seminar, allow us to explore long-term dynamics of knowledge development. Video-recordings and self-confrontation interviews about some sessions of the seminars will enable us to undertake a fine-grained analysis of short-term process of understanding.

Theoretical framework: situated experience across time

To study individual features of a learning activity entangled in a material and social environment, we adopt lived experience as a fundamental unit of analysis (Dieumegard, Ollagnier-Beldame, Nogry, & Perrin, 2017). We endorse the theoretical perspective of enactivism (Maturana & Varela, 1980; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991) in which lived experience is delineated as an ongoing process of coupling which is lived "from within". Heir from the phenomenological tradition, it emphasizes what "*a singular subject is subjected to at any given time and place, that to which she/he has access in the first person*" (Depraz, Varela, & Vermersch, 2003).

The enactivist approach originates from research in biology showing that the interactions between an organism and its environment are asymmetrical, in the sense they are determined by the structure and the history of the organism (Maturana & Varela, 1980). Therefore, cognition is not considered as the representation of a pregiven world, but is rather the arising of a world and a mind in a process of coupling based on the actions that a living being performs. For human agents, no information is present as such in the environment, but they continuously and actively constitute it by selecting and interpreting what makes sense for them in the environment. Each agent "has" a situation which is the portion of the material and social environment s/he interacts with at a moment. Consequently, Varela's enaction paradigm is theoretically compatible with situative approaches of cognition(Varela et al., 1991). Lived experience appears to be both active and passive, directed to and affected by the world. It constitutes a whole intertwining individual activity and its material and social situation. As a unit of analysis, it allows considering the situative feature of learning processes at an individual level.

Lived experience is also situated in time: it is singular at each moment. Behind this apparent simplicity we have to consider a complexity of time just as it is lived. Although experience is always lived in the present, it integrates the past and the future (Varela, 1999). In the present, we find echoes of the past, or retentions, and a <u>future experienced in the present, or protensions, pointing to the predictable or implicit immediate moment in what has already occurred in the past and in the present</u> of the present moment. This plurality of present-time combines with the inclination of human agents to constitute coherencies that transcend it. *Distinctions* arise in experience (Maturana, 2000; Maturana & Varela, 1980; Varela, 1979): a human agent distinguishes entities (situations, elements, processes) and relations between them. This conception was influenced by Spencer-Brown (1969) in which differentiating a "this" is considered as the source of cognition. However, in an enactivist perspective distinctions are fundamentally based on analogical family resemblance rooted in action (may it be corporal and/or intellectual) rather than on abstract logical computation (Varela, 1979).

Considering arising of distinctions bears two important consequences for the study of lived experience in learning situations. First, knowledge has to be viewed in relation with these distinctions (Maturana, 2000): a sense of familiarity, regularity and "déjà-vu" is present for the entities and relations which are recognized across time; familiarity is lived here and now, but transcends the present time. Similarly to the "Knowledge in Pieces" approach (diSessa, 2014), entities and relations that are familiar constitute knowledge elements that relate loosely and unstably and can combine in different ways. Second, agents spontaneously break down the very flow of their lived experience into discrete entities, distinguishing different moments, actions, situations, and associating them by more or less cohesive relations. The arising of such coherencies allows the agents thinking, reflecting, speaking, writing, etc. about their lived experience. Hence, the experience which is singularly lived here and now (*Erlebnis*, in Dilthey's terms) leads to various structures of experience - stories, plots, inquiries, etc. - (*Erfahrung*, in Dilthey's terms) that are retrospectively and prospectively constructed, and influence, in turn, the here and now.

Adopting lived experience as unit of analysis for the study of learning process adds an epistemological difficulty to this ontological complexity. Lived experience of other agents can only be informed through accounts which may be affected by these retrospective/prospective constructions. Moreover, they take part in the learning process. For the researcher, the problem is to get her/his descriptions in order, and not to get lost – knowingly or unknowingly!

Aims and research questions: how can we consider different temporalities of learning?

Our research is devoted to studying knowledge development by considering lived experience as a fundamental unit of analysis.

We habitually use the "course-of-action method" (Theureau, 2006), providing a fine grained analysis of the understanding processes for time stretch lasting few tens of minutes. From corpuses including videos and self-confrontation interviews with several individuals, we can describe for each of them a detailed succession of units of activity and of knowledge elements representing the dynamics of the experience they lived. In this method, the use of video recordings and the method of self-confrontation interviews are aimed to obtain accounts close from experience which is lived in the here and now of some learning situations (e.g., classroom situations, simulations, debriefings, etc.).

However, learning is not only a short term process of understanding on the fly. How could we develop a methodology for connecting short and long term transformations in knowledge? We endeavour an empirical study in order to articulate the "course of action method" with other methods investigating lived experience during longer time spans, such as "life course of a practice method" (Hauw, 2013; Theureau, 2006). Life course of a practice method shares with course-of-action method the same enactivist framework. Methodologically, it uses biographical interviews. These are retrospective constructions which result from, but are quite far from the experience which was lived during the years they account for.

Methodology

Context of the research
We are carrying out our study in a professional training program in psychotherapy. The participants, who are engaged in a personal psychotherapy and are generally over forty, undertake to become practitioners in Gestalt-therapy. During two years, they attend nineteen monthly three- or four-days seminars aiming at developing their abilities as psychotherapist. At the end of each seminar, few questions are asked and participants have to write a report from these questions. In parallel, they carry on their own personal psychotherapy.
The training program is held by a team of six experimented practitioners and trainers in Gestalt-therapy, who are also very supportive for the research project.

Participants
We investigate the experience of three participants of a nine-person group engaged in this program: two women, Elisabeth (already therapist in hypnosis and brief therapy) and Catherine (former elementary school teacher), and a man, Fabien (independent trainer for companies).

Access to data and confidence
Before data gathering, Theureau (2006) highlights a mutual confidence condition: the researcher has to contractualize the collaboration with the participants (behaviour of the researcher in the different situations, deontology for the property and the use of the data). This condition not only meets an ethical concern but also a scientific one: it maximizes the possibility to access to the very personal resonances present in lived experience. This is particularly crucial in a training program in psychotherapy in which what is lived is very often related to intimate life:

> *I went to the first appointment. She welcomed me very kindly (…). And then, silence, total silence. She was sitting in front of me, and was kindly looking at me (…). In fact, in my life, there is only one person who can sit in front of me and have nothing to say to me: my father. (…) For me, this attitude, silence, it is pure abandon. (Elisabeth, RN-S2)*

Consequently, the researcher attitude is collaborative, and in no way neutral. We regularly inform the participants (and more broadly the training team) of the study progress and discuss the manner by which we access to their experience (the concept of lived experience is central in Gestalt-therapy). In order to maintain a reflective control on this implication process, we keep a collaboration diary.

Data gathering
We use several methods in order to make vary the distance (metaphorically, the "focal length") between the accounts of the participants and their lived experience in the different situations encountered along the training program. It makes also vary the grain size of the description of lived experience that can be obtained from the data.

Re-situative narrations: Few days after each seminar, we meet each participant for a re-situating interview (Hauw, 2013) in which s/he is asked to retrieve and evoke their experience during the different moments of the seminar. These data lead us to identify "units of activity" representing each participant's lived experience with a relatively coarse grain (order of magnitude: half an hour); we can also identify the most significant distinctions they have constructed:

> *Marc invites me to feel what is my intention, what underlies my intervention. (…) When I say her "I pay attention to your smile", he invites me to ask "what I want to do?". And I realize I want to make her get aware of her smile. And… and I understand, from what he says, that here, I am not in a Gestalt-therapist attitude when I want to make people get aware. Rather, I have to say what happens for me, and just to see what it brings to the other. Then, I feel I am too directive, very close-minded on what I propose. (…) There I see what I am doing, and I begin to see everything that I do not know to do, and there I am really excited. (Fabien, RN-S7)*

These interviews are not supported by traces such as video-recordings, they are subject to retrospective constructions that may move the participants a bit away from what they experienced during the seminars. However, their substantial number (15) and their time spacing will allow us to identify transformations along the training program.

Self-confrontation interviews: During some sessions of the seminar in which the presence of a researcher is the less distortive, we will audio-record the behaviour of the participants, and carry out self-confrontation interviews. These data will enable us to proceed with a fine-grained analysis (order of magnitude: ten seconds) of the participants' understanding processes during time stretches of few tens of minutes.

> *Trainer (in a debriefing):* It is a discipline to adopt as soon as possible. To be precise, to describe, to use the good words… (S7, 3:58:30)

> *Self-Confrontation Interview:* There, I agree. The word discipline, I find it as something positive. It means there is a practice, a training, a willingness, and that it is not easy (…). I tend to like that ! (Fabien, SC-S7)

Contrarily to the previous data gathering method, audio-recordings support self-confrontation interviews and help participants to keep more close from what they experienced during the seminars. We will concentrate the gathering of such data during three consecutive seminars in order to precisely identify the relationships between short term processes of understanding and long term processes of knowledge transformation and stabilization.

Instrumented narration / Animation on traces: The two previous methods afford accessing to lived experience in a discontinuous manner as they are collected relatively to a three or four days seminar. But in this training program in psychotherapy, it is obvious that knowledge transformation extends beyond the seminars, at least since participants write a report about each of them. Theureau (2010) use a method of "animation on traces" for analysing the creative activity of a composer during the two years period of the writing of a piece. To this end, he confronts the composer with all the material traces of the composition process which were collected and dated (drafts, notes, ideas noted on transport tickets, successive versions of computer files, etc.). From these traces, he asks the composer to evoke what he experienced during the composition period.

As this method of instrumented narration is time demanding for the participants, we will use it only at two moments of the training program: on the occasion of an interruption of the seminars in September, and at the end of the training program. We will use different traces produced by the participants about the training program (notes taken, re-elaboration of notes, report written, etc.)

Data analysis
From our data, we expect to retrace the transformations of distinctions all along the training program:
- The transformation of knowledge elements: identification of new entities or new relations, differentiation, composition between them;
- The transformation of structures organizing globally experience which is lived here and now : (Theureau, 2006, 2015) termed them as sequences, series, stories, projects, themata.

As we use different methods for gathering data, we could use triangulation effects between them that may confirm or infirm our results, and help us not to confuse the different temporalities of experience.

Planning of the research

Schedule for the gathering of the data

	Theme of the seminar	Re-situative interviews	Self-confrontation interviews	Instrumented narration
January 2018	Family and group process	X		
February 2018	Psychotherapy (as patients)	X		
March 2018	Body consciousness	X		
April 2018	Creative adjustment	X		
May 2018	Gestalt-therapist role	X		
June 2018	Awareness and consciousness	X	Test	
September 2018	(no seminar)			X
October 2018	Eliciting patient's experience	X		
November 2018	Gestalt-therapist experience	X		
December 2018	Interactions and group	X		
January 2019	Gestalt-therapist cognition	X	X	
February 2019	Content and process	X	X	
March 2019	Processual concepts	X	X	
April 2019	Psychotherapy (as therapists)	X		
May 2019	Being aware	X		
June 2019	Presentations / ending	X		
July 2019	(no seminar)			X

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