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Spontaneous clarity - a new reality dawns: Psychotherapists' lived experience of epiphany moments

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Abstract: This article presents findings from the author's doctoral research into psychotherapists' perceptions of their moments of self-awareness and epiphanies. Following a review of existing research on this phenomenon, the author used a reflexive, hermeneutic phenomenological approach to analyze textual data, including interview transcripts, generated by seven experienced psychotherapists. The author also drew on a written account of her own experience of the phenomenon in order to strengthen the transparency of the study and aid interpretation. Data analysis suggested that, for therapists, manifested moments of self-awareness encompassed four existential dimensions: spatiality, corporeality, temporality and relationality. Five major themes emerged: 'Spontaneous clarity - A new reality dawns'; 'Cross the conscious threshold - Makes the truth much bigger'; 'Inner knowingness manifests'; 'Tipping point'; and 'Vacillation'. This research adds to existing literature in highlighting this phenomenon with a greater breadth and depth of clarity. Hermeneutic phenomenology encouraged a nuanced understanding of an epiphany with the sense of crossing a threshold into a conscious space. In addition, the high degree of body connectedness therapists experienced in such moments and how it displayed its own idiosyncratic sense of time added further knowledge on this topic. The idea of oscillating awareness, where the therapists experience a flux between the cultivation of consciousness and retreating from awareness, supplements the current literature.

Keywords: epiphany, moments of self-awareness, phenomenology, reflexivity, existential dimensions, psychotherapy

Parting of clouds does not cause the sun to shine, but merely reveals what was hidden all along. (Hawkins, 2011, p. 80)

This article seeks to explore experienced psychotherapists lived experience of an epiphanic experience that presents as a sudden moment of self-awareness. The word epiphany originates from the Greek word *epiphaneia*, which means 'manifestation'. The Concise Oxford English Dictionary (12th

edition, 2011, p. 480) defines an epiphany as "a moment of sudden and great revelation." In the psychotherapy field, the term has been used to denote positive change that is both sudden and profound. For example, Jarvis (1997, p. 605) defines an epiphany as a "sudden discontinuous change, leading to profound, positive and enduring transformation through reconfiguration of an individual's most deeply held beliefs about self and world."

Literature Review

Jauregui (2003) conveys something of the combination of mystery and familiarity invoked by the concept when she characterises an epiphany as:

a revelation usually brought on by some simple, homely, or commonplace experience out of conventional time and space and language [at such times it can strike you] ...The universe is bigger than it was a minute ago and so are you. (Jauregui, 2003, p. 3)

The synonyms of epiphany include revelation, moment of awareness, knowledge of thought without a reason, immediate cognition, and intuitive understanding (Fletcher, 2008). Such a synthesis follows from the assumption that while individual authors have used somewhat differing conceptual frameworks, they all refer to a common process of sudden, brief, vivid inner experience of heightened awareness. For the purpose of my study a moment of self-awareness is defined as a sudden insight that results in deeper understanding and heightened level of consciousness.

In the field of psychotherapy various terms have been used to describe outstanding moments of in-session change, among them "good moments" (Mahrer & Nadler, 1986); "significant events" (Elliot, 1983); and "helpful events" (Grafanaki & McLeod, 1999). Stern (2004) uses the term "kairos" or "moments of meeting" to describe such life-changing moments in therapy.

My own interest in this topic derives in part from my psychotherapy practice, where several of my clients have undergone moments of acute awareness that have encouraged an alternative perspective on a situation and ultimately a change in their worldview. But I, too, have experienced such an occurrence, which influenced me to make positive changes to my life. One such moment came unannounced after years in which I had experienced dissatisfaction in my chosen profession. Early one morning I encountered a dawning of awareness, an internal truth made manifest that also carried a message supporting my return to education. In that potent, indescribable instant, a truth was revealed and a felt sense that could not be denied. I became aware of implicit fear and latent self-views I had carried for many years which supported this eclipse of awareness.

My passion and genuine curiosity about the epiphany phenomenon would prove the bedrock of my doctoral research. Throughout, it was important for me to remain transparent, acknowledge my implicit assumptions (Kafle, 2011) and ensure they fed into the research in creative, useful ways (Kelly, 2019).

Such transcendent, unpredictable moments do not lend themselves readily to research. However, in the psychotherapy field four studies stand out for the light they shed on the epiphany phenomenon: Murray (2006); McDonald (2008); Fletcher (2008); and Amos (2019).

Murray's (2006) unpublished doctoral thesis is a qualitative enquiry into what he terms "an unencumbered moment" (p. 35): a life-changing moment of clarity when one's foundational beliefs about self and world undergo a radical shift. Murray set out to provide an in-depth descriptive account of that moment of clarity. While this research is characterised as qualitative in nature, the methodology used is left largely unspecified. Instead, Murray formulates his research questions through introspective and retrospective processes whereby he uses his experience of his own unencumbered moment to critically analyse himself. Following this, he selects participants from a specific demographic: individuals whose lives have previously been in danger and whose foundational beliefs have suddenly shifted. Five of the nine participants were previously known to Murray.

Murray's (2006) research offers some important insights into the epiphany phenomenon. For one participant, the experience was indescribable: "Everything changed for me...I can't really explain it" (p. 290). Another participant described an instant when everything, including her future course of action, became "absolutely, totally powerful, totally clear" (p.260). The research data relies heavily on Murray's own interpretations, however increased reflexivity or member checking may have aided the trustworthiness of this study (Langdridge, 2007). The principal strength of this study lies in its qualitative approach to a relatively unexplored area.

McDonald (2008) employed an existentially orientated narrative inquiry approach to the collection and analysis of participants' understandings of epiphanies. Central themes emerged on the basis of content analysis (Krippendorff, 2009). Epiphany moments, as experienced by participants, were found to involve "a sudden, abrupt, and positive transformation that is profound and enduring" (p. 90). Participants experienced a moment of significant insight which had the effect of illuminating elements of self-identity that had hitherto been obscured.

While McDonald's findings do not relate specifically to therapy (none of four participants was a therapist), a more serious limitation is the tendency of his findings to support his own pre-formed ideas. This appears incompatible with his chosen qualitative methodology: self-identity existential analysis. In addition, there is a disparity between the

researcher's interpretation and participants' understanding of the experience. At times, interpretive categories seem out of step with the interview extracts offered in their support. Although he writes with considerable fervour, McDonald at times fails to establish firm links between epiphanic experiences as described by participants and the inferences he proposes. However, the analysis is supported by a number of quality control measures, including consensual validation by participants and credibility checks by academic colleagues and an experienced consultant psychiatrist/ psychotherapist.

Fletcher's paper (2008) forms part of a relatively recent strand of process research involving "in-session change" (Sherman, 1994, p.229). Arguing for the relevance of what she calls "clinical epiphany". Fletcher (2008) suggests that eliciting stories of epiphany can help the process of therapeutic change and improve long-term outcomes. Comparable to McDonald (2008), Fletcher (2008) also chose a narrative approach to interviewing because of the primacy it affords human action and lived experience. Her study involved the analysis of qualitative data obtained from detailed interviews with four women, all of whom were experienced psychotherapists known to Fletcher herself. Participants were asked to recount an experience of epiphany in therapy. In the paper, Fletcher explores what was experienced at the time of the epiphany and the ways in which participants' clients later made narrative sense of that encounter. The findings shed light on the complex, often quite tacit meanings that surround client-therapist interactions during epiphany experiences. Each story is unique and idiosyncratic, and no attempt is made to generalize findings to a wider population. However, this paper's focus differs from the intention for my research which is interested in sudden moments of awareness that is not exclusively within the therapeutic sessions. Whereas Fletcher (2008) was interested in the client narratives of in-session change which stand out as exceptionally memorable within a lengthy span (at least ten years) of therapy.

The reliability of the findings is enhanced by the fact that participants were invited to review transcripts and interpretations to ensure accurate, relevant and compelling descriptions of their experience. The fact that participants were asked to describe a lived experience of the phenomenon, which may have occurred in a clinical context, allows for a closer examination of the therapeutic possibilities of the phenomenon.

Amos (2019) investigated the lived experience of epiphanies for her doctoral research. Following Jarvis (1997, p. 5), Amos defines epiphany as a "sudden discontinuous change" that can transform an individual in a profoundly positive and lasting manner through a reconfiguration of their most deeply held beliefs about themselves and the world.

IPA was the chosen methodology. However, a limitation of IPA may be noted in the way it breaks stories down into themes which seems incongruent given that qualitative research does not generalise the findings (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Furthermore, it tries to provide a systematic structure to what is an open interpretive process (Smith et al., 2009).

In the case of Amos, use of IPA methodology is accompanied by a strong impulse to present findings in such a way as to evoke empathic understanding. For Amos, this is seen as having particular relevance to fleeting moments of awareness. She therefore widens the lens by including arts-based representations of her research findings: six found poems are dispersed through the text, each chosen to supplement the emerging interpretations. In addition, Amos presents interview transcripts in stanza form, a choice which has been described as "particularly effective as a means of representing the rhythm, meaning and structure of oral narrative" (McLeod & Balamoutsou, 2004, p. 291). This manner of presentation offers readers the time and space to notice, observe and reflect.

However, the lack of a psychotherapeutic perspective amongst the participants may have presented as a limitation and further affected the clinical implications of this research. A key finding of Amos's research is the healing potential of sudden, profound moments. The study is strengthened by its rigorous methodology section and by its identification of aspects of the phenomenon that could be picked up and developed by future researchers. My own research is in some respects a response to this invitation.

While all four studies highlighted above underline the relevance of a qualitative approach to the study of epiphany moments, only one utilised a phenomenological hermeneutic lens, through the use of IPA, to interpret the data. Furthermore Fletcher's, (2008) research was the only study that explored the phenomenon from the vantage point of the practicing psychotherapist.

The experiential knowledge that can result from a moment of acute awareness is particularly relevant to professionals working in caring or therapeutic roles (Amos, 2019). As someone who has experienced a profound moment of self-awareness, I was interested in how therapists who had had similar experiences made sense of them and their therapeutic implications. Drawing on the experiences of men and women from a range of psychotherapeutic modalities, I sought to pursue the following research questions: What characterizes psychotherapists' lived experience of moments of self-awareness, and what understandings do they derive from such moments?

Participant Recruitment

Methodology: Hermeneutic Phenomenology

I sought out a research methodology and design that resonated with my chosen topic whilst also remaining loyal to my natural research disposition. This engendered fidelity and heightened the truth value of the research (Levitt, Motusky, Wertz, Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2017).

Central to phenomenology is the notion of embodied knowledge: the view that understanding can never be simply cognitive but rather is always interwoven with senses, mood and intersubjective contexts (Amos, 2019). Phenomenological enquiry therefore roots itself in tangible human experience. It seeks to explore meaning rather than quantify or measure (Amos, 2019). Hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 1990, 2014) emphasizes the interpretative nature of *being-in-the-world*, and the importance of texts, either as a source or as an expression of the phenomenon under investigation (King, 2021).

Hermeneutic phenomenology emerged as the most appropriate choice for this study. I was drawn to the fact that it 'invites both freedom of experience and intellectual thoroughness' (Anderson, 2011, p. 17). It recognises the role of interpretation both of text and of lived experience; it acknowledges the researcher as an integral part of the process; it places importance on the description of lived experience through writing; it encourages a dialogue between text and reader, which requires openness; it also builds knowledge through an iterative process (hermeneutic circle); and finally, it allows for the use of literary devices (metaphor, image, mythology) when engaging with the phenomenon (Kafle, 2011).

In opting for a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, I set out three objectives: to understand the phenomenon of moments of self-awareness through experience or consciousness (Finlay, 2009); to stay as close as possible to the description of the lived experience (King, 2021); and to "transform the lived experience into a textual expression of essence" (van Manen, 1990, p. 36).

By positioning myself in the hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition of van Manen (1990, 2014), I sought to combine participants' written accounts and interview transcripts with input from a wide range of philosophical and literary sources, including my own lived experience.

Participants were recruited via word of mouth and by placing a poster outlining the research in the staff rooms of reputable counselling centres, always with gatekeeper consent (McFadyen & Rankin, 2016). A combination of purposeful maximum variation (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and snowball homogenous sampling (Lewis et al., 2007) was used to ensure the participants had expert experience of the phenomenon (Goss & Stevens, 2016) including diversity of participants in terms of sex, age, geographical location and psychotherapy modality. This allowed for multiple perspectives on the shared experience (Ritchie, 2013).

Potential participants were sent a plain language statement and a consent form to sign. Eight participants (two men and six women) were recruited on this basis; four participants were integrative therapists, two were humanistic existential practitioners, and two were psychoanalysts. All the therapists were accredited with between three and twenty-six years' experience. They all had engaged with a minimum of three years personal therapy. A pilot interview with one participant was conducted, and the interview protocol was slightly revised following their feedback. In total, seven participants contributed to the research.

Data Collection

Three distinct textual sources formed the basis of data collection:

Firstly, my own lived experience descriptions of the phenomenon were noted in a journal. I explicitly laid out my pre-understandings and personal experience of moments of self-awareness, so as to understand how my reflections and thought process might influence the interpretive nature of the research.

Secondly, each participant provided a short written account of their epiphany experience before being interviewed. The participant's written lived experience descriptions offered a textual version of their individual experience and understanding of moments of self-awareness. Handy and Ross (2005, p.40) suggest that "semi-structured written accounts of experience can also provide highly focussed, descriptively rich, reflective data". Van Manen (1990) encourages externalising one's lived experience on paper to foster an objective stance towards experience and enable it to be seen from another perspective.

The third component comprised the transcripts of semi-structured interviews conducted with each participant. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) argue that semi-structured interviews are the most effective method of collecting in-depth, data-rich and nuanced accounts of lived experience. Van Manen (2014, p. 317) distinguishes between the phenomenological interview, used as “a means for exploring and gathering experiential material”, and the hermeneutic interview, geared to “exploring the ways that fundamental phenomenological notions and methods can be understood.” In the case of my research, the goal was to reveal the universal elements underlying the inter-subjectively experienced phenomenon (Creswell, 2009).

Data Analysis

In terms of methods, hermeneutic phenomenology offers few guidelines. “In fact, there is no actual method of how to do hermeneutic phenomenology” (Finlay, 2011, p. 115). Van Manen (1990) offers no prescriptive method for research. Instead, he suggests that the researcher draw on and adapt methods as necessary, in response to the phenomenon under investigation.

Although lacking a template on which to model my research, I still needed a research intention with a clear phenomenological sensibility (Finlay, 2011). As van Manen (2014, p.320) notes, “uncovering a phenomenological lived experience is a complex and creative process of insightful invention, discovery, and disclosure”. It involves a free act of seeing meaning that is driven by the *Epoché* and the reduction (van Manen, 1997). Thematic analysis refers to the “process of recovering structures of meaning that are embodied and dramatized in human experience represented in a text” (van Manen, 2014, p.320).

For the analysis of data, I followed the four steps of analysis outlined by van Manen as part of a hermeneutic phenomenological “selective or highlighting approach” (1990, p.94; 2014, pp. 320-321): Each participant’s experience was presented as a lived experience description (LED). This sought to reflect what were understood to be the most important aspects of the participant’s lived experience; Each LED was converted into an anecdote; Anecdotes were submitted to holistic, selective and line-by-line thematizations; The emerging themes were chosen for exemplary phenomenological reflective writing (van Manen, 2014). This allowed me to extrapolate the themes further and confirm my interpretation.

In order to strengthen the analytical process, the methods used to analyze the data were explicitly and sequentially outlined. Each finding was supported by verbatim quotations, and the number of participants contributing to each category was clearly indicated. In exploring themes and insights, I treated text as a source of meaning at every level. Every paragraph, sentence, phrase and expression in participants’ written LEDs and interview transcripts was subject to close examination. The consequences of choosing this particular combination of hermeneutic phenomenology offered further depth on exposing the phenomenon in its raw and pure essence.

Interpretation was conducted on the basis of the hermeneutic circle, a process of coming to understand the essence of something through interpreting and moving iteratively between the whole and the parts (Finlay, 2011). This involved a process of co-creation between researcher and participant involving reading, reflective writing and interpretation (Gadmer, 1960), which was continued until a ‘fixed gestalt’ or point of saturation became manifest (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

During the analysis stage, a number of quality control measures were undertaken. As part of a process of consensual validation (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999; Yardley, 2000), participants were invited to review and amend their transcripts (Morse et al., 2002). In addition, academic colleagues critically read the evolving analysis to check that themes and patterns were consistent, credible and supported by evidence (Elliott et. al., 1999; Yardley, 2000). To strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings, I sought further confirmation from three external doctors of psychotherapy; all of them experienced researchers (Dukes, 1984, as cited in Creswell, 1998).

Ethical Considerations

The research received approval from my University’s ethics committee. At every stage, I sought to conduct the study in a responsible and ethical manner, with attention paid to legal requirements and relevant professional guidelines. Every effort was made to ensure the anonymity of participants and to respect the confidentiality of disclosures. Pseudonyms were used throughout this study to protect the identity of the participants.

Respect for the autonomy of participants required that their involvement in the project was voluntary at every stage

(Pollock, 2012). I practiced non-maleficence towards each participant by avoiding causing them harm or distress and by granting them the right to withdraw at any point. I also took participants' psychological safety into consideration (McCosker et al., 2001). Given the sensitive nature of my research, I was aware that participants might experience immediate and/or delayed impacts on their mental health. While moments of awareness offer valuable insights, even partial self-knowledge could involve a degree of unexpected pain (MacIntyre, 2004). Further counselling supports were offered post interviews should the therapists have required.

Findings

Analysis of the data yielded a number of insights into the complex, often quite tacit meanings that surround a lived experience of a moment of self-awareness. Four general categories within self-awareness manifestations emerged: spatiality; corporeality; temporality; and relationality. On the basis of these categories, five main themes were uncovered: 'Spontaneous clarity --A new reality dawns'; 'Crossing the conscious threshold -- Makes the truth much bigger'; 'Inner knowingness manifests'; 'Tipping point'; and 'Vacillation'(see Figure 1, below). From this, 17 subthemes emerged. In this article, however, the focus is on findings relating to the principal themes. See figure 2 which summarises the 5 principal themes and their subthemes.

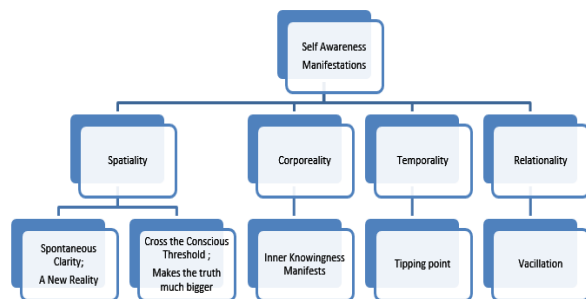


Fig 1: Findings of psychotherapists' understanding of moments of self-awareness

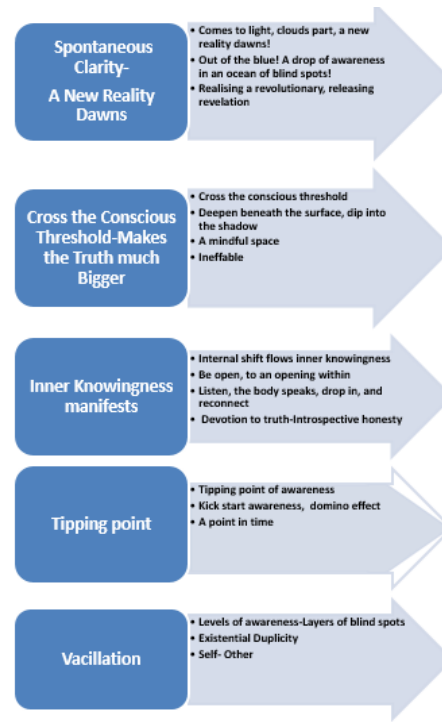


Fig 2: Moments of self-awareness: Themes and subthemes

Theme 1: Spontaneous clarity - A new reality dawns!

This theme captures participants' understanding of an epiphany moment as a sudden dawning of awareness and heightened knowledge. Participants emerged with a new sense of reality. Five of seven therapists described their lived moment of awareness as an uncovering, an experience of spontaneous clarity that allowed them to see with fresh eyes. Several therapists described their lived moment of self-awareness as suddenly seeing life through a different lens. One therapist understood the moment as a clearing of awareness, like 'a curtain being drawn back' and 'something new coming to light'. The narrative below elucidates accurately how Jacob understood a moment of awareness as a new found clarity. This type of moment of awareness was different from his ordinary consciousness of a busy day. It fostered the ability for Jacob to objectively witness himself. This created an 'aha' moment where not only did Jacob understand more about himself but also exposed new information:

It was almost like a curtain being drawn back and spontaneously I was moved to see what the busyness of life on a daily basis doesn't necessarily let me see. So that moment I got clarity... that moment of clarity, drawing back the curtain, giving a reflective space, objectively looking at self and catching self and that 'aha' what it was I just thinking or feeling...I suppose for me it would be something like coming to a sense of understanding something more about myself. Something that is new,

something that surprises me. Something that can delight me as well as awaken curiosity. (Jacob)

The narrative below elucidates Joe's intimate experience, which was revealed in a pre-reflective manner. The poetic use of language describes Joe's personal experience with immense imagination that honours the methodological intention of this research, which was to elicit the eidetic reduction of the phenomenon:

That moment of awareness, the clouds parted... it dawned on me... I saw it clearer than ever before with new eyes. The universe showed me everything. Everything! The source of everything is divinity. Now this has been an experiential reality. What I'm sharing is experiential reality not from reading books or whatever. It's in experience of my own life. So everything, the essence of everything is the divine. (Joe)

For most participants, their moment of acute awareness presented suddenly and without volition. Participants used a range of metaphors to describe this: "a light bulb moment of clarity"; something that "popped up" or "bubbled up", or came "out of the blue"; an experience akin to "finding the missing piece of the puzzle".

For Joe, this type of experience was a moment of heightened awareness, with intense clarity and new-found knowledge. The use of metaphorical language created an evocative image of a rocket of awareness soaring through the air and out of the blue clarity manifested.

I remember one time surrendering to God. And I was surrendering, and I was walking up the steps to my apartment and this inner knowingness came, non-verbal but 100 percent rock-like, 100 percent clear, you're only surrender to your own higher self. And this inner knowingness came, non-verbal, out of the blue, silence. (Joe)

Theme 2: Cross the conscious threshold - makes the truth much bigger

Participants further understood a moment of self-awareness as a form of cultivating consciousness. This manifested by paying attention, looking objectively and seeing another perspective. Participants used phrases such as "wider field of vision"; "seeing around the corner"; and "detour of understanding" to describe this dimension. Within this moment of consciousness, the truth became more conspicuous. It was as though participants experienced a heightened sense of truth. In the anecdote below, Annabelle describes the challenge to her habitual way of seeing and thinking. While retaining her position that religious and other

doctrines express one point of view, she uses the metaphor of "seeing around a corner" to describe a moment of acute insight and awareness:

It was like seeing around a corner and then suddenly I knew... whereas I could be on the other side of the corner thinking that's all there is this bend...so it was like widening my field of view, and I saw the world from a different angle...it certainly felt like the world is wider...just stepping back and looking at life in a bigger way, having a bigger perspective creates a moment of awareness...and makes the truth bigger. (Annabelle)

The language Annabelle uses here is metaphorical and evocative. To "see around a corner" summons up the image of something spatially new and different, something that feels different from (or even the opposite of) one's previous way of seeing things. In the instant of turning a corner, new possibilities became visible. Annabelle's lived experience of that moment of awareness then presents itself as a wider perspective on life, one which brings a greater truth to the fore. This is akin to a mindful space that supports reflection and new awareness.

Samantha's experience of an epiphany moment presented as a deepening of awareness. This type of moment created the notion of an intensifying and expansion of knowingness; a sense of creating awareness on previously unknown or unconscious material:

I think I've deepened into awareness now that I speak, I think it's the perfectionist piece that I'm not good enough....feeling not good enough and yet I've never been told what I did wasn't good enough. In fact, I was probably told the opposite...because I put in the extra effort to do things....that moment of awareness was a deepening...a deepening of everything. (Samantha)

Participants struggled to capture the indescribable feeling associated with such profound lived experience. For Lucy; "moments of awareness are hard to describe... ineffable, elusive, sometimes gradual and subtle."

Theme 3: Inner knowingness manifests

Participants also spoke of their lived experience as involving "an internal shift" that manifested as an "inner knowingness". Such moments of awareness seemed to emerge from within the body and were described as having a qualitative felt sense and as being visceral in nature and sometimes preverbal. This type of moment presented for a number of therapists as an internal truth that materialized within the context of the body. Numerous therapists understood this moment as attuning to their bodies and connecting with innate wisdom. Other

narratives within this theme relate to the ways in which participants' bodies formed part of their experience of epiphany moments. Participants mentioned listening to, connecting with, and dropping into the body. For Joe, his moment of awareness emerged as a pre-verbal inner knowingness that came from the divine within. It was definite, conclusive and an alternative way to know that was not cognitive in nature:

It's beyond doubt. It was just an inner knowingness...when I meditated and my mind was completely silent, and in fact the mind will only take you so far. Then it was more prayer and surrender and devotion. So it was out of the silence arose an inner knowingness that was non-verbal.(Joe)

A number of participants mentioned how physical and emotional bodily connectedness encouraged moments of awareness. One participant described how their lived experience of a moment of awareness involved them connecting with their body in order to disconnect from their busy mind. This in turn altered their state of awareness. For Jacob the body has the potential to be the vessel or channel that carries and delivers moments of self-awareness:

Knowingly and unknowingly. Consciously and unconsciously...it pops up...the awareness of the body holding something of the past. And the awareness of the body being able to reconnect with what was repressed...that is a moment of awareness it is a revelation. And yet we're going around all day, every day with these potential revelations in our body! But they're blind spots aren't they or the protection. That's very profound. (Jacob)

Another type of moment of awareness presented as an "opening within". Several participants experienced this as a form of openness, as being open or seeking an opening within. Just as an attitude of openness is essential to phenomenological enquiry, internal openness engenders a space within, one where a moment of awareness can be created. Participants spoke of having the "openness to challenge one's perspective", being "open to view another possibility", and facing a "choice to be open".

Theme 4: Tipping point

For most participants, there was a pronounced temporal dimension to their moments of intense awareness. Several participants experienced this phenomenon as a time of change. The imaginary language of a tipping point illuminates this incident and brings the experience alive. Some experienced having the choice to allow the awareness to arise later, at a time when they were ready to manage it:

It's a timing thing and it's an inner resource thing I think, there's also this idea of you can't handle the truth, you have to be in a position to be able to manage what you're going to find out for yourself, because those blind spots are not always beautiful. Like finding out the person you're in love with is in the throes of an addiction is not a wonderful truth to become aware of. (Annabelle)

Other participants experienced a 'tipping point': whether out of the blue or as the culmination of a sequence of smaller revelations. This tipping point was presented as a turning point or breaking point in one's life: the exact moment of change from an unconscious state to one of awareness. "Timing is everything" and "appropriate timing" were among the expressions used.

Susanne told of how her epiphany moment had been preceded by years of turning a blind eye to her own unhappiness. Then things reached the point where she could no longer look away: she had to confront the truth:

I was in this relationship for decades, there was a lot of blind spots, or blind sighted, or turning a blind eye...But it feels like that moment was a tipping point and that was the moment of awareness, which was 'I have choice!'...There had been other moments over the previous years... And I had tried to deal with them... I turned a blind eye to the truth and to the behaviours, until it became so bad I couldn't do it anymore that was a breaking point, or my tipping point into awareness. (Susanne)

Also present within this theme was the sense that epiphany moments could have a domino or ripple effect: that they could engender further moments of awareness:

By opening a smaller blind spot, or by creating a smaller moment of awareness, it has a kind of a ripple effect on other parts. I suppose you could say that awareness kind of creates more awareness.(Roisin)

For me personally, this experience felt like a 'dropping of awareness'. It came slowly and subtly over years of frustration and feeling lost. Small nuggets of awareness guided my way until one day a climax of awareness presented that alerted my every sense. It whispered and shouted at the same time 'Leave your job; fear not'. It felt like a moment of truth; a moment of perfect clarity. This insight begot further privileged moments.

Theme 5: Vacillation

In some cases, participants' lived experience of moments of self-awareness presented as a form of oscillating awareness: a fluctuation between moments of self-awareness and the absence of such perception. Moments of awareness could be

fluid or unsettled in nature, involving a rise and fall of awareness. A number of participants' understood this moment as changeability in awareness that was instable. The narrative below exemplifies this idea

[That] I'm ready and able doesn't mean I always act on the awareness. Yes and no, I slip back. And, here and there, I'm kind of back and forth a bit with awareness. (Samantha)

The proposal of a semi-awareness where one is divided between awareness and blindness of awareness was evident. As if that moment was somehow visible and invisible almost simultaneously. Samantha's encounter with a client elucidated her experience:

That client said something I had semi-awareness around already. She actually brought to my attention something I half knew. It was a truth, and it highlighted for me, 'how does this impact my work?' (Samantha)

For some participants, moments of awareness were made up of levels and layers, or were experienced as occurring in stages and steps:

Creating moments of awareness which are layers in that cake, that multi-tiered cake layers. That depth of history. (Jacob)

This perception of awareness-in-flux stands in contrast to the notion of an instantaneous moment of self-enlightenment and illumination.

Discussion

The findings of this research shed new light on psychotherapists' understanding of moments of self-awareness. Specifically, self-awareness manifestations appear to take place within four existential categories: those of spatiality, corporeality, temporality and relationality.

Spatiality

Moments of self-awareness took place within a spatial domain. Lived space involves more than the mathematical dimensions of length, height and depth (Heinonen, 2015). It is also 'felt' space, the feeling aroused by the space in which

one finds oneself. Participants understood epiphany moments as something new coming to light, as clouds parting, as the dawning of a new reality. They experienced a spontaneous

moment of clarity that allowed them to see more clearly and with fresh eyes.

Neville and Cross (2016), too, found that personal experience/observation type epiphanies increased clarity and awareness. One participant in a study by Kounios and Beeman (2015) spoke of seeing things in a new light. All the participants in McDonald's study (2008) reported experiencing significant insights which had the effect of illuminating previously hidden elements of their identity.

For many of the participants in the current research, epiphany moments were sudden and unexpected. They were described as 'light bulb', 'bingo' and 'aha' moments, ones that 'pop up' or 'bubble up out of the blue.' This appears to be a prevalent experience. In research conducted by Miller and C'de Baca (1994), more than half of participants (58 per cent) claimed their experience had taken them by surprise. In a later study (Miller & C'de Baca, 2001, pp. 18-19), a participant described an epiphany moment thus: "It was really this bubbling up – like a bubbling and the words just sort of popped." For McDonald (2008, p.90), an epiphany moment is: "a sudden, abrupt, and positive transformation that is profound and enduring." It is distinct from other types of positive change and transformation that are typically gradual in nature.

The current research adds several spatial elements, including the types of space that may engender a moment of clarity: the natural environment, for example. Through the use of hermeneutic phenomenology, the current study also captures participants' nuanced experience as a sense of crossing a threshold into a conscious milieu.

Corporeality

A key finding of this study is the degree of body awareness psychotherapists experienced during moments of epiphany. Participants' accounts encompassed moments of awareness that manifested within the body, with some matching my own personal experience: that being connected to one's body in both physical and emotional terms encouraged moments of awareness. Connection with the body enabled one to disconnect from the busy mind; it altered one's state of awareness. As Heinonen puts it, "Lived body refers to the phenomenological fact that we are always bodily in the world" (Heinonen, 2015, p. 37). One of Murray's (2006, p.290) participants felt the experience had come from the centre of his soul and "without thinking". For Ilivitsky (2011), the epiphany moment arose from a deep inner bodily wisdom just 'knew'. When co-researchers in Fletcher's (2008) study were asked about what was happening within them as they were recounting their experience, several reported being aware of some physical body sensations and emotions.

These findings were confirmed in a workshop I subsequently designed and conducted as part of an effort to disseminate my findings to trained psychotherapists. A surprising number of participants shared the narrative of how the body is a vehicle for creating epiphany moments: a significant finding which increases the understanding of moments of self-awareness. Although, the existing literature made some mention of this sense of bodily presence, the findings of my research appeared to emphasize the body's ability to communicate such awareness and new knowledge. This finding encourages one to connect with one's body at a deeper level and engage in dialogue with it.

Temporality

For the psychotherapists participating in my study, time was a critical element of a moment of heightened self-awareness. Some participants felt as if they had the choice to let the awareness arise at a safe time, when they were ready to manage it. For others there was a gradual, unfolding element to the experience. For others still, their epiphany moment seemed to strike "out of the blue" – out of time itself.

Lived time, rather than clock time, is our temporal way of being in the world. As Heinonen (2015, p. 37) notes, "The dimensions of past, present and future constitute the horizons of a person's temporal view." For von Franz (1975, p. 120), "the unconscious has its own ways of revealing what is destined in a human life just at that moment when it is ready to be integrated."

In my study, the 'tipping point' theme revealed how the development of awareness culminated in a critical moment when awareness became manifest. Participants understood this as a precise moment in time, one that signified a shift from an unconscious state to a momentary state of awareness. This could then have a domino effect, begetting further moments of insight.

As Ilivitsky (2011) notes, the term "sudden" does not imply that change occurs all at once, free of preceding circumstances. Bien (2004, p. 494) argues that while change may occur continuously, "at some point this change is manifested in an apparently dramatic manner." For participants in the current study, life changes could be triggered either by an 'aha' moment (epiphany) or by a series of events (encounters) resulting in increased insight and the

reinterpretation of meaning (Neville & Cross, 2016). For some participants, their epiphany moment proved to be a tipping point: an experience that went on to shape their lives more generally.

Such findings highlight the elusive nature of the phenomenon. Rather than conforming readily to a worldly sense of time, a moment of self-awareness adheres to its own idiosyncratic gauge of time, one that is immeasurable and unpredictable.

Relationality

Participants' accounts pointed to an oscillation between the manifestation of, and retreat from, awareness. For Heidegger, perceiving the world is akin to "looking through a fog; those elements in the foreground of awareness take on an arresting prominence while other aspects fade flawlessly into the background" (1993, cited in King, 2021, p. 38). Heidegger (1927/1962) availed of the metaphor of light in relation to consciousness, noting that in moments of consciousness other aspects of our worldview become hidden or withdraw into the shadows. He called this "exchange of ideas between what is revealed and what is concealed, *Aletheia*" (Heidegger, 1993, cited in King, 2021, p. 39).

For Sokolowski (2000), life involves a push and pull between presence and absence, between clarity and obscurity. Something that has come sharply into focus may then retreat into vagueness. For most participants, their lived experience of a moment of awareness was a process that involved stages and steps of awareness. This is in tune with Rochat (2003), who argues that self-awareness involves a continuous, dynamic process, a multiplicity of levels.

The relational dimension of the phenomenon was also evident in the element of dialogue revealed by participants. Such dialogue could take the form of communication with another or it could involve gentle self-questioning. Bohleber, & Jiménez (2017) argue that unconscious processes are co-constructed and come to life during the process of relating with significant others. For Duval and Wicklund (1971), it is the immediate social environment that enables the individual to view him/herself objectively and from another's point of view; the self is challenged from the subject of self-awareness to the object of self-awareness.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

This study offers fresh perspectives on moments of self-awareness as experienced by psychotherapists: a hitherto little explored area. It provides detailed, rich description of

the phenomenon on the basis of participants' lived experience. As Smith (1997, p.80) notes, such description may "enable one to connect with the experience of all of us collectively."

One of the challenges associated with hermeneutic research is dealing with minute detail: elements in the text which might generally be taken for granted or overlooked (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1999). Hillman (1983, p. 57) has described hermeneutics as "monotheistic" in the sense that phenomena are interpreted in terms of concepts with a single meaning. However, van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic approach offered a comprehensive approach to offset this limitation.

The lack of a specific method or guide for doing hermeneutic phenomenology (Finlay, 2011) could be viewed as a limitation. Given the nature of hermeneutic enquiry, it was also a great challenge to utilize the 'reduction' (Kafle, 2011). However, I was able to describe how reduction (in terms of revelation) was disclosed as structures of the lived experience of a moment of self-awareness.

The results of this study do not have empirical generalizability. However, as Ilivitsky (2011) points out, the relevance of research can be judged by those who apply its findings elsewhere. Ultimately it is up to the reader to evaluate the validity of findings and the extent to which they might be applicable in other contexts.

Three of the participants I knew in a professional capacity prior to the research. This may have engendered unconscious bias (Unluer, 2012). However, I was acutely aware to remain professionally impartial to all participants at all times. Furthermore, the validity of the research was limited to the collection of data at a single point in time. However, member checking will have accommodated any changing views or attitudes of the participants after the time of interviewing (Langdridge, 2007).

Finlay (2006) states due to the variety of criteria by which their research could be judged, qualitative researchers should not leave evaluative comments to the end, but make explicit from the beginning. Therefore, the three concepts- integrity and its constituents, components of fidelity, and utility influenced all aspects of my research (Levitt, et al., 2017). Fidelity of this study was captured through the 'intimate connection that I obtained with the phenomenon under study' (Levitt, et al., 2017, p. 10). I structured the data collection to capture the *Erlebnis* - the lived experience of the phenomenon – reaching verisimilitude through thick descriptions (Ponterotto, 2006). The strength of this study was further improved by incorporating diverse sources of data collection (e.g. participant's reflective texts, personal reflections and transcripts). This generated rich findings which illuminated the variations and comprehensiveness of the phenomenon which were relevant to the study's goals (Levitt, et al., 2017). To aid the trustworthiness and van Manen's expectations of a

hermeneutic phenomenological study (Yardley, 2000; Willig, 2013), self-reflection was fundamental to establishing procedural integrity. Fidelity was enhanced through remaining transparent about the influence of my perspective upon data collection (Levitt, et al., 2017). As an interpretive investigator I made extensive use of self-reflection to ensure the 'results were grounded in data' (Levitt, et al., 2017, p. 14). Rigour was further evidenced by the thoroughness of the study, my attention to theoretical sampling, the quality of the interview and the completeness of the analysis undertaken (Smith et al., 2009). In addition to aid the strength of this research, prior to running these interviews the questions were piloted with someone knowledgeable on the phenomena to ensure that the questions are appropriately phrased, consistent, and were aligned to the research's aims and objectives (Kelley et al., 2003). A further participant checking exercise was conducted with the pilot person and all participants to carefully read through their interview transcript and make amendments as they wished, this ensured ethical autonomy (McCosker et al., 2001). It was an important part of feedback that the therapists recognised the interpretations as their own (Sandelowski, 1996). Utility was achieved by meeting the aims and objectives (Levitt, et al., 2017) of this hermeneutic phenomenology study, which for that reason I feel van Manen would approve.

Clinical Implications

This study sought to shed a light on psychotherapists' lived experience of epiphany moments and also to highlight the implications for psychotherapy research, training and practice. The types of moments of awareness that manifested for the therapists presented as, a deeper understanding, cultivation and heightening of consciousness, and an opening into bodily wisdom. All of which invited an alternative lens to view life through. Furthermore, therapists experienced this as ebb and flow of awareness in oscillatory motion with potential to climax to a tipping point of awareness, which may invite new knowledge and beget further awareness.

As Amos (2019) notes, identifying particularly meaningful moments in psychotherapy can assist the identification and cultivation of opportunities for client change. For McDonald (2007 p. 28), the role of the psychotherapist is to promote "deep personal insight and changes in perspective." Chilton (2015) goes as far as to argue that it would be unethical not to promote the process of epiphanies within the context of therapy. Furthermore, according to Hawkins (2011) a moment of self-awareness creates a heightened sense of consciousness, which has the ability to completely alter a person's orientation to life including one's goals, values and a new sense of self.

For psychotherapists, encouraging greater self-awareness involves more than a duty of care. Experiencing moments of intense awareness has proved central to my own ability to create clarity in my life. Not only have moments of insight enabled alteration of the qualitative state of my routine life from one of existing to living; it has further challenged both my behavioural and interpersonal styles of relating to the world. I am in no doubt that knowledge about such experiences can assist others to make positive changes. Gaining insight into this phenomenon requires something more than additional theory or neurophysiological explanations. Qualitative research offers a way to explore individuals' actual experiences and the meanings they construct or derive from what they have lived through.

The potency of a moment of self-awareness is too great to be dismissed. In such a moment, one may view reality from another perspective and become conscious of entering a new space, a fresh temporal dimension. Suddenly blind spots or previously hidden areas of one's being may become illuminated. In a flash there's the possibility of breaking through an impasse, of starting afresh.

Personally and professionally, I feel it is vital not only to explore these rare privileged moments, in a timely and appropriate manner but also to encourage them – towards giving others the permission and the opportunity to experience life with greater clarity and a new sense of truth.

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