

Imitation as a Method of Analysis: Understanding Participants' Perspectives

Abstract

This article discusses how and why imitation of research participants' verbal and non-verbal language can improve our understanding of interaction processes in counselling. Experiences from a research project are presented to illustrate challenges and advantages in the process of analysis. An analytical approach was developed during the project, in which imitation of the participants' verbal and non-verbal language was used. Imitation as a method of analysis is discussed with 'phenomenology of the body' as a frame of reference. The conclusion is that imitation can add to the understanding of counselling processes by serving as a tool for understanding participants' perspectives in a way that gives a holistic picture of the interaction between them. This is possible because imitation activates the researcher's insight based on bodily experience and tacit knowledge. Thus, interpretation and theorizing of the research phenomenon can be strengthened.

Keywords: imitation; counselling processes; interaction; phenomenology of the body; qualitative analysis; video observation

Introduction

This article addresses two key aims: First, it discusses how and why imitation can be helpful as a method of discovering subtle features and hidden structures in video data from counseling processes in educational psychological research. Imitation is used here primarily with the purpose of finding a way to understanding the participants' perspectives and meanings in the

counselling processes. Second, the article discusses advantages, risks and limitations of imitation by examining it from epistemological perspectives, primarily within the phenomenology of the body.

The theoretical focus of the article implies that it does not aim at describing or discussing in detail technical aspects of the method.

Imitation of video recorded counseling processes could possibly be useful in training practitioners (counselors). Imitation in various forms are being used in training Gestalt therapists. Similar methods using verbal and non-verbal acting are being used for training purposes in many professions. Simulated role-play has been practiced widely for many years in educational settings. The Conversation Analytic Role-play Method (CARM) uses audio and video recordings of real-time, actual encounters as an evidence base for making decisions about effective practice and for professional development (Stokoe 2014). This article discusses, however, imitation solely as a method of analyzing video data for research purposes, with a focus on epistemological issues. It should also be emphasized that imitation is used here as a supplementary method in combination with other methods of analysis of video data. Although the article is primarily aimed at the research community, we hope it can contribute to further discussions of how imitation and similar methods can be helpful in training counselors and other practitioners.

One of the characteristics of qualitative research is that the researchers themselves are the main methodological tools from the beginning to the end of the research process. The main reason for this is that, although there are many methodological guidelines and analytical methods, the methods must be individually adapted in each project. This pertains particularly to the processes

of analysing of data. While quantitative researchers can use a range of statistical procedures (because data consists of numbers), qualitative researchers typically work with words and/or other types of meaningful or symbolic expressions. These types of data often are collected with the purpose of understanding lived experience, and are therefore as multifaceted and complex as life (and language) itself. To study interaction between two or more people, observation (participant or non-participant) is probably the most suitable method of collecting data. However, the researcher's capacity to see what happens and to take notes is limited. Therefore, video recording is often used. This method, here called video observation, offers many possibilities of studying action and interaction, but there are also ranges of challenges that must be addressed.

The focus in this article is on imitation as a supplementary method of analyzing video observation data of interaction in educational psychological counselling processes. Analytical experiences from an empirical research project are presented, and methodological and theoretical implications are discussed within body phenomenological perspectives. The discussion in the article is based on a study of interaction in special education counselling from the Norwegian Educational Psychological Counselling Service (EPCS) to schools and kindergartens.

(Counsellors in the EPCS were earlier titled school psychologists.) The participants seeking help from the counsellors were teachers working with children who had been referred to the EPCS. The teachers received counselling sessions in order to develop their competencies and improve their practice with these children, who had social, behavioural or emotional problems.

The overall purpose of the study in which imitation was used as a method was to develop understanding of educational psychological counselling processes. Video observation was used as data collection method in order to analyse interaction and communication in the counselling relationship (Author 2012; Author 2014). The analyses were from the beginning to the end

grounded in data (i.e. experience-near), and the approach was mainly descriptive. However, at a certain point in the process, we realized that we were stuck in the so-called “coding trap” (Richards 2005), and the accounts that we were able to give of the interactions and individual experiences in the counselling processes that we were studying, were fragmented, overloaded by details, and – most importantly - lacking a coherent understanding of the participants’ perspectives. In other words, although the descriptive validity of the interactions was relatively good, the analyses did not result in a valid interpretive or theoretical understanding that was the aim of the project. Therefore, we had to change the analytical approach and take a new step that could possibly help to develop a holistic picture and a new understanding of the data. Inspired by perspectives within the phenomenology of the body, we decided to try imitation of the participants verbal and non-verbal language and their bodily movements to see if this could lead the way to a more coherent understanding of what was going on in the counselling sessions. This proved to be a turning point in the analytical process.

This article describes how imitation was carried out, and how and why imitation – as a supplement to other types of descriptive and interpretive analyses of video-recorded data - resulted in a new understanding at both the descriptive, interpretive and theoretical level. The question that will be discussed in this article is: *How, and why can imitation of participants’ verbal and non-verbal language and bodily position and movements add to our understanding of interaction and communication in counselling processes?*

Imitation is used here as a term and is close to terms like mimicking, recreating, simulation and mirroring. Imitation means doing the same movements, mimicking or simulating others’ body language and movements, recreate participants’ verbal and bodily language when observing/analysing video data. Imitation means trying to place oneself in the participant’s

situation in the counselling process, in order to gain a better understanding of the interactions between the participants. Imitation is also close to re-enactment, which means to re-enact counselling sessions by imitating the participants' verbal and bodily language.

Imitation as a method was used in our project in the final stage of analysis, as an attempt to solve analytical problems that were met. In order to see why and how it was used, we will describe the analytical process that led up to using imitation in a later section in the article. First, some general challenges and advantages of video observation as a method will be discussed.

Video Observation – some Methodological Challenges and Advantages

Despite being supported by a rich literature about observation as a research method, it may be challenging to analyse observation data. The data need to be organized and interpreted and given meaning in a condensed form (Kvale, Brinkman, Andersen and Rygge 2009), which may be very demanding. Video observation typically generates large amounts of data, often prompting researchers to look for their own creative methods of analysis (Pink 2014). Corbin and Strauss (2008, x) encourage researchers to do just this: 'Doing qualitative research is something that a researcher has to feel him or herself through'. However, it is still expected that the analytical methods meet the criteria of good research. Granting researchers' first-hand experience in the field of research, while also maintaining the authenticity of the situation, is one of the advantages of using observation. Through first-hand experience, the researcher gains a deeper understanding of what really is going on (Knoblauch and Schnettler 2012). A further advantage is how observation offers the opportunity to focus on subtle phenomena in a larger context (Corbin & Strauss 2008). Observation done via electronic recording equipment (video cameras or various

kinds of tablets) simplifies studying the observed phenomenon repeatedly and is therefore well adapted to studying verbal and non-verbal conduct, thus making thorough analyses possible.

Observation is, nevertheless, sometimes felt as challenging because the researcher is a part of the situation she is researching, and becomes more or less involved by being there (Corbin & Strauss 2008). The researcher's presence may influence the research in ways we need to be aware of.

Several discussions in the field highlight these issues, e.g. Hazel (2016) has emphasized the importance of reducing the researcher's influence. How the video equipment itself influences the situation has also been thoroughly investigated (e.g. Hazel 2016) and problematized (Heath et al. 2010). Another methodological challenge concerns video observation of interaction. Interaction entails *temporality* (regarding words, gazes, gestures, movements), and there is an ongoing discussion about whether these temporal aspects are adequately captured by video observation. Words, gazes, gestures, movements, and in particular the flow/pace of interaction, are expressed in a fine-tuned reciprocity among those involved, which may be difficult to document through video (Mondada 2012).

There is a difference between seeing something as a mere visual image, versus seeing it as 'something' (Kvernbekk 2000). The latter implies a pre-understanding, i.e. the observer 'sees' based on his or her own previous understanding of the phenomenon. The manner in which the researcher interprets situations and actions differently from the participants then becomes a challenge. There is good reason to question the degree to which a video recording captures a situation's reality (Angrosino 2008). It is important to be aware that the video recording must not be considered more real than the participants' experiences with the observed phenomenon. Video materials must be treated as representations, which is an issue frequently discussed in the literature of methodology (e.g. Pink 2014). The participants' behaviour may depend on events

before or after the recording, ones not captured by the camera. Knoblauch and Schnettler (2012, 336) remind about one of the fundamental assumptions of any interpretative social science: 'Actions and interactions are not only to be observed – rather, actions are guided by meanings any observer must try to account for, not only in principle but in each instance'.

In order to understand interaction and communication in counselling processes it is necessary to get access to and describe the participants' perspectives as accurately as possible while simultaneously being aware of the researchers' pre-understanding. This is a key perspective in the phenomenological research tradition. At a crucial stage in our analyses of the video observations of counselling processes we wanted to find out whether imitation of the participants' bodily language could give a better understanding of their intentions and experiences. Theoretical underpinnings for this methodological approach were found in the phenomenology of the body.

Some Phenomenological/Body Phenomenological Perspectives

Phenomenology emphasizes complex kinds of awareness/consciousness, both in experience and reflections on experience. Put differently, '[w]hat makes an experience conscious is a certain awareness one has of the experience while living through or performing it' (Smith 2013).

Awareness is emphasized as crucial to experience making, and this is a key concept underpinning our analysis of video observations.

The body's importance for human experience is emphasized within the phenomenology of the body. Merleau-Ponty (1994) rejected the notion that body and mind are split; our conception of our own body is neither a mere mental image nor a purely physical experience. The body is 'me' in active interaction with the environment. 'I' do not have a body, but I am a body. Both my

bodily experiences and my thoughts/reflections around these experiences are me. More concisely, the body is filled with consciousness; the conceptualization of the world happens through bodily experience (Reuter 1999). One might say that there is a dialectical relationship between a person as body and the world/environment in which the body is situated (Salada & Adorno 2002). The body perceives the environment and simultaneously receives impressions from the environment, in a continuous movement between the inner and outer world of the body (Salada and Adorno 2002). Merleau-Ponty (1994) states that this dialectical relationship between the body and the world is a dialectical relationship without synthesis, which means there will always be ambiguity and no absolute truth about human experience, interpretation and knowledge generation.

In a research process phenomenological-hermeneutical and phenomenology of the body perspectives imply that interpretation and understanding occur within the researcher's own pre-understanding, i.e. what the researcher already know and think about the phenomenon.

According to Gadamerian hermeneutics (Fay 1996). The researcher's experiences and beliefs are part of the research process and cannot be excluded. It is, however, crucial for the researcher to consciously examine his or her pre-understanding. The researcher's understanding and experiences will also be incorporated in data generation, which frequently leads to a participant observer role. Ashworth (2000) argues that the researcher's interaction with the participants must be seen as a genuinely human encounter, which includes the researcher's behaviour and communication as an obvious part of the research process.

While phenomenological philosophy originally focused on description, and only description, newer philosophical approaches seem to have developed towards a greater emphasis on interpretation being inherent in the experience, followed by a broader methodological

acknowledgment of the need for interpretation and of the influence of the researcher (Davidsen 2013). Different methods of analysis have been developed, emphasizing specific aspects of phenomenology. One that has inspired our analyses, is Giorgi's (2005) descriptive model in which it is crucial to capture the meaning of the participant's experiences and then transform these into terms relevant to the discipline. The researcher's interpretation is pushed back in the initial phase of the analysis and then explicitly pulled back in later phases. Common elements in several analytical methods in phenomenological research is that the researcher's previous understanding/interpretation contributes to the analysis but does not overshadow the participants' experience, and that the phenomenon is described as accurately as possible, with discipline-relevant terminology and in accordance with the participants' experiences (Colaizzi 1978; Giorgi 2010; Moustakas 1994). Emphasizing that the researcher's interpretation and understanding is a natural part of the research process, while at the same time demanding that the phenomenon be described as much as possible on the participants' terms with discipline-relevant terminology, poses challenges in the analysis process. The content that is being interpreted, i.e. the participants' experiences with the phenomenon, are interpretations in themselves. The researcher's analytic work therefore is a double hermeneutical process, *a double hermeneutic* (Smith 2019).

The video observation data and the structure of the analytical process

In our research project, imitation was used as a supplementary method at a certain stage in the analytic process in order to solve problems that occurred. It is, therefore, necessary to describe briefly the process that led up to using imitation.

The video recordings in the study (nine hours in total) were entered into the software NVivo8 and transcriptions were done in this programme. NVivo is a theory-free programme that can be used in both theory-driven and data-driven analysis; the analyses can be configured to fit each individual project (Richards 2009). In this project, data-driven analyses were used, following a circular, dynamic and creative principle, in line with the basic philosophy of the hermeneutical tradition of phenomenology. Different types of interaction were identified, first between the teacher and his or her pupils, parents and colleagues, as these emerged from counselling sessions, and second by observing types of interaction in the counselling relationship between counsellor and teacher.

The understanding of interaction in counselling processes that we wanted to develop, may be divided into three types: *descriptive*, *interpretive* and *theoretical* understanding. According to Maxwell (1992) in his analysis of validity in qualitative research, this is an implicit common-sense conceptual structure in the work of many qualitative researchers. The term ‘interpretive’ in his model refers to understanding the phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants, i.e. the emic level of analyses. This structure may imply that the analytic work is roughly divided into three stages, i.e. description, interpretation and theorizing. Our experience is, however, that data driven analyses require continued efforts to describe data as carefully as possible, and that in our interpretive analyses, we often had to go back to the video recordings to see and describe what we saw and heard. Interpretation rests on description – but also vice versa, because to be able to see something, you must have some preconceptions of what is going on and what it is that can be seen. One could almost say about analytical work that nothing is finished until everything is finished.

The videos were transcribed into written text. The transcripts focused on what the participants said, and non-verbal actions and other bodily movements were also written down roughly where this seemed appropriate to the project's focus on interaction and communication. The transcriptions played an important role in the analysing process in the project as a whole. However, for the analyses done through imitation, the transcripts were of little or no importance; the imitation was done when watching the videos.

The main challenge was to find an analytic way to capture the core of the participants' meanings, i.e. how they understood the situation and how their meanings were transformed into actions/interactions. To deal with this it was necessary to start the analyses from the data material. The video footage was studied and the transcripts were read with the purpose of forming a holistic impression of it all. The initial picture was, however, rather chaotic and seemingly incoherent.

In accordance with the purpose of the research, the analyses were concentrated on three main themes or phenomena. First, the problems in the teachers' practice that had caused them to seek counselling were identified, with a focus on what kind of relationships that were described and discussed during counselling, i.e. *whether the teacher's relationship with children/pupils, parents, colleagues and/or other areas were stated as the problem*. Furthermore, the time spent talking about the different relationships was recorded. This mapping presented no major challenges; it only dealt with writing down roughly what the conversations were about and how much attention was given to each topic.

The second main theme was focused on the core of *the different relationships, as they were perceived through the descriptions given by the teacher*. Categories were developed based on the

teacher's review of children/pupils, parents, colleagues, and the relationships with them were identified. The transcriptions were used as a starting point for developing categories, but the video footage was also studied thoroughly. The teacher's descriptions were identified and recorded as meaning units, such as 'We need to get the child to draw even if he/she absolutely don't want to'. At the next level, descriptive expressions were transformed into educational psychological language, for instance 'To influence the child so that he or she wants to draw'. Thereafter these transformed meaning units were synthesized into categories or themes, such as 'Influencing unwilling children'.

The purpose at this stage was to develop more general descriptions of interaction and communication in the various relationships. The open search for individual descriptions of communication resulted in a large number of categories/themes which became hard to handle further since it was difficult to see patterns and connections in the material. The need to be as faithful as possible to the participants' perspectives and meanings led to caution about explicitly bringing in the interpretative and theoretical level too early in the process of analysis. The resulting large amount of categories describing the teachers' relationships with children, parents and colleagues were thus based directly on the data material; the process of analysis was data-generated and experience-near (Corbin and Strauss 2008; van Manen 1990; Geertz 1973).

The third theme to be examined was *the relationship between the counsellor and each teacher* as it appeared from the video observations and transcriptions. The interaction between them was studied, and categories were developed in the same manner as in the analyses of the teacher's relationship with children/pupils/parents/colleagues, i.e. through a descriptive analysis. Here too the result was a large number of categories.

Performing the analysis according to this procedure yielded a very detailed and fragmented picture of the content of the dialogues and the relationships between the parties involved. An holistic picture was impossible to see because of the extreme focus on the single elements, resulting in what Richards (2009) calls a ‘coding trap’. The desire to maintain the descriptive perspective and understand participants on their own terms also implied certain reluctance to bringing in the researchers’ own interpretations and definitions into this phase. A different path was sought, which was in fact an even more thorough data-driven analysis.

A Turning Point in the Analyses - Imitation of the Participants’ Verbal and Body Language

Up to this point, the analyses entailed listening to conversations, watching video-observations and studying the transcriptions, but this did not enable us to capture and understand the core of the participants’ meanings. Being present during the recordings provided a certain idea of the relationships, in addition to the knowledge generated through the analysis up to this point. Would it be possible to be even more thorough in an effort to capture the participants’ perspective and the core of their interactions? Was there another way to understand the conversations, to gain a sharper focus, on the participants’ terms?

The solution was found in applying a phenomenology of the body approach (Merleau-Ponty 1994). Gestalt therapy, a well-known method inspired by the same approach, focuses on bodily experiences when studying several problems and/or phenomena. For instance, therapists, when they receive guidance about their client work, may be asked to imagine the client in question and do a bodily imitation of the client’s walk, posture and movements. The purpose of this is to help the therapists, through their own bodily experiences, discover aspects of the client that may

otherwise go unnoticed (Skottun and Kruger 2017). With this method, we were inspired to try a similar method in analysing video recorded counselling processes – focusing specifically on the participants’ body language and imitating them. It was decided to watch the footage and sit like the participants, move like them and say what they said. Initially the sound was turned down to catch the interaction on the non-verbal level. Later the sound was audible and the video footage was studied, focusing on one participant at a time, and imitating their bodily and verbal actions. Each informant was studied and imitated by the researcher for about fifteen minutes, and lingering for some time on each individual became important.

This became a turning point in the project. Imitating the participants made several patterns of interaction appear in a more complete, clear and focused manner. Some types of interaction were more apparent than others in the individual counselling relationships. Through bodily positions, gestures and movements information was obtained that provided new insight. For instance, the interaction was experienced completely differently when the analyst sat with one leg crossed over the other, breathing superficially, compared to when sitting in a relaxed position with arms loosely placed in the lap, looking straight at the counsel-seeker. The experience of sitting with crossed arms and legs and breathing superficially led to feeling tension and feeling as if thoughts and emotions were held back. Sitting in a relaxed position, with open arms, and looking directly at the teacher, on the other hand, led to a feeling of openness to sharing thoughts and feelings and to listening to the other.

Through body positioning and movements, the interaction was in this way perceived and experienced. In addition to imitation, our reflections around bodily experience were used. Below are some illustrations.

One example is that the counsellor in one of the cases was asking the teacher a lot of questions, like open questions, follow-up questions, closed questions and hypothetical questions. The categories developed from the videos/transcriptions contained these different ways of asking questions. However, when *imitating* the counsellor asking a lot of questions, the experience of holding back own thoughts, feelings and evaluations was obvious. As a counsellor the focus was on the teacher and not on own thoughts, opinions, evaluations, feelings etc. Imitating the teacher, gave an experience of getting stuck in answering all the questions, and a feeling of not getting on/getting deeper into the problem for which the teacher had sought help to handle.

Another example: The counsellors in general gave the teachers some advices about how to act related to their (the teachers') problems. The counsellors also presented many possible solutions to the problems discussed. In one specific case, the counsellor emphasized a lot on giving advice. Thus, the categories developed from this part of the video centred on different ways of giving advice, for example advice formulated as questions, advice formulated as suggestions, advice formulated normatively ("you should"). When imitating the counsellor in this specific case, a strong wish to persuade the teacher about the best solution was revealed. A need to get the teacher to understand that the counsellor's advices were the best became the focus. Imitating the teacher in this case, gave the experience of 'I have to do as the counsellor says' and 'I don't understand the essence of what she wants me to do, but I have to agree'. These non-verbal aspects in the interaction in both examples were discovered by imitation, the understanding of the non-verbal dimension was thus expanded. Imitation thus unveiled some core aspects of the participants' actions and interactions from their perspectives.

Going further from this interpretive level of analyses we concentrated on developing a theoretical understanding of the phenomena. Various types of interaction in the cases were

identified. At this stage, theoretical concepts in phenomenology of the body and gestalt therapy were used. *Confluence*, i.e. flowing together, feeling joined to, togetherness (Kokkersvold and Mjelve 2007; Wheeler 1998; Zinker 1978), was identified in one case. This confluence was apparent both between teacher and child/pupil as well as between counsellor and teacher. In another case *introjection* was identified in both relations. Introjection means taking in meanings, thoughts and experience acritically from your surroundings, without making them your own (Korb et al. 1989; Perls et al. 1994.). *Retroflexion*, i.e. holding back thoughts, emotions, reactions, and instead turning them inwards against yourself (Perls 1992), was identified in a third counselling pair, here too both in the interaction between the counsellor and the teacher and in the teacher's interaction with the child/pupil and/or other parties in her practice. It was concluded that one type of interaction could be identified both in the counselling relationship and in the relationship between the teacher and pupils/parents/colleagues in all three cases.

Thus, *parallel processes* were found in all cases; the content or meaning of the processes was, however, different from case to case, as illustrated by the examples above. It is however beyond the scope of this article to go further into discussions of the phenomenon of parallel processes.

To strengthen the validity of the findings and to meet ethical obligations it was decided to conduct respondent validation (Colaizzi 1978; Silverman 2006). The study's focus, research questions, methods and results were presented to the participants in individual meetings with each. In all three cases the participants confirmed the findings. Respondent validation is, however, problematic, for several reasons. One threat to respondent validation is the perception that the researcher might be seen as an expert with the right answers, although this can probably be reduced by expressing humility and openness. Another challenge is that this validation process often results in new data, since many respondents also want to comment on the results

and add new information. However, this did not turn out to be a problem in this project. A third challenge is that in phenomenological research the purpose typically is to develop some disciplinary, essential meaning of the experiences that are studied. This meaning is based upon, but is not identical with the participants' individual meanings. Based on Maxwell's (1992) typology of descriptive, interpretive and theoretical validity as a frame of reference, our conclusion is that respondent validation may be useful in validating "pure" descriptions of what was said and done, and thus strengthen the descriptive validity. To a certain degree, this procedure may also be useful in validating participants' individual, conscious experiences, thus strengthening the interpretive validity. However, the participants' are probably not (if they are laypersons) in a position to validate the researcher's account of the essence of the experiences, i.e. the general/theoretical/disciplinary understanding that the researcher has developed (Giorgi 2010; Maxwell 1992).

Discussion

The focus in this article is how and why imitation of participants' verbal and non-verbal language can add to our understanding of interaction and communication in counselling processes within educational psychology. In order to understand the interaction, it is necessary to grasp the participants' perspectives, i.e. how they experience the counselling. In the following discussion, some theoretical, methodological and practical aspects of these questions will be addressed.

Interaction and communication in counselling was the main research focus in the project at hand. As mentioned above, three kinds of interaction/communications patterns (confluence,

introjection and retroflexion) were identified by using imitation. The method described includes imitation first of one participant (the counsellor) and then the other participant(s) (teacher(s)) in each case. The idea here is that using imitation in combination with traditional (mainly thematic) analyses, the analyses will result in an *understanding of the dynamics/interactions* between the participants which otherwise is difficult to obtain. How can observation and imitation of the separate parties help to understand the interaction between them? One answer is that imitating *all* participants, and not just one of them, offers the researcher more insight because interaction is experienced from different perspectives.

The main theoretical basis for using imitation in analysis of video observation data in this project is lived-body phenomenological philosophy, following the ideas of Merleau-Ponty (1994), as described above. In accordance with this approach, attention on each individual participant was emphasized. Imitating the participants' body language and simultaneously listening to what is said can give a *holistic understanding*, which is different from what is obtained by merely reading transcriptions, watching and listening to the recordings. Imitation of movements gives a more complete understanding of the conversations. Mimicking the participants' body movements brings a more global view of their experiences. A central idea within phenomenology is that humans experience each other as a whole when they meet 'face to face' (Duesund 1995; Merleau-Ponty 1994; Zahavi 2005). When using video observation, one may claim that the researcher meets the participants 'face to face' every time the recording is played. Imitating the participants strengthens this 'face-to-face' encounter and makes it more real than when maintaining a more passive observer position. In our data analyses, obtaining a holistic picture was crucial. It was necessary to escape from the so-called 'coding trap' (Richards 2009) that occurred during the process of analysis. Too much focus on the individual elements led to a large

amount of single categories describing the teachers' problems and anxieties in their practice. The richness of details undermined the possibility of achieving a coherent understanding of the participants' experiences. Imitation contributed to moving the process of analysis forward, giving qualitatively new insight into the participants' experiences, as exemplified earlier in the article.

Another aspect of this procedure has to do with *practical knowledge vs. theoretical knowledge*. Following the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, there is a difference between theoretical and practical knowledge, and motor movements are associated with practical knowledge (Romdenh-Romluc 2011). Imitation involves motor movements by the imitator, who thereby gains access to her (the researcher's) practical bodily knowledge that is related to the research phenomenon. For example, a researcher may have theoretical knowledge/understanding of what it means to sit with legs crossed, but she or he may have a different intuitive bodily knowledge about what this means when experiencing this in a specific situation. Imitation provides access to this intuitive bodily knowledge and therefore represents practical knowledge, which may be a valuable supplement to the researcher's theoretical knowledge and understanding of the research phenomenon.

It is debatable, however, whether and how analyses involving imitation result in a better or *more correct perception of the participants' perspectives*, compared to analyses without imitation.

There is no simple answer to this. Imitation cannot be considered as a simple reproduction of the participants' movements; the researcher's pre-understanding of the movements will guide what she or he perceives (Romdenh-Romluc 2011) and consequently what is imitated. For example, some smaller movements may be overlooked in favour of others, bigger and more conspicuous movements. In addition, the researcher's motor skills and patterns of movement may influence

the imitation and thereby the researcher's experience and perception of it. The researcher's understanding of how specific movements may affect a person will be part of the base of interpretation. Researchers may have divergent concepts of what the meaning of different movements may be; the subjective element is therefore present in this method as well.

Claiming to know what is going on in others' minds, through imitation, is of course problematic. We may ask, like the philosopher of social science Brian Fay (1996, 136), «*Is the meaning of others' behavior what they mean by it?*» The answer is, according to Fay, that the meaning of others' behavior is what *they* mean by it but only as rendered in *our* terms. In other words, the meaning of the behavior of the counsellors and the teachers in our project, and the interactions between them, is what it as understood by *them* means for *us*. Thus, *both* the intentions of the participants *and* our interpretations of their behavior were both operative. Imitation served in our project as a tool for unveiling hidden aspects of the participants' actions and interactions as experienced by them, thereby making it possible to understand what the actions meant – for us.

The researcher may understand and identify his or her inner self (mind) through introspection, while directly identifying other people's inner self (mind) is not possible. In her exposition of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, Romdenh-Romluc (2011) states that one can only experience another self through awareness of their body. This emphasizes that it is only possible to understand others through observing their bodily expressions. Through observation and imitation of others, researchers may assume what is going on in others' 'mind' by being made aware of what is evoked in themselves.

Awareness is therefore a crucial factor: the researcher's awareness of her or his own sensory impressions while imitating the body language of participants. What does awareness of our own

sensory impressions imply? Merleau-Ponty underlines how awareness of sensory impressions is the same as perceiving with your consciousness (Romdenh-Romluc 2011). The sensory impressions themselves are not objects that can be observed. The body, on the other hand, is physical and can be observed. The body is 'me' and can therefore never be excluded in the making of experience. When I sense/perceive, the body too senses/perceives and experiences; these processes are inextricably connected (Romdenh-Romluc 2011). Other things may be observed, but your own sensory perceptions are ongoing actions. Having awareness of your own ongoing sensory perceptions, as recognized through imitation, is specifically emphasized in studies inspired by the phenomenology of the body.

The term 'lived body' is central to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. This term reflects how life is lived and expressed through the body. The body is self-awareness and cannot be abandoned; it is not a tool; it is ourselves (Engelsrud 2006). This perspective is important in two different ways. First, this makes it meaningful to study the participants' non-verbal actions and movements thoroughly, i.e. the participant's bodily expression. Second, it is relevant to include the researcher's 'lived body' in the analyses, i.e. the researcher's bodily experiences as they appear through imitation of the participants. Body and consciousness are inextricably linked together. Merleau-Ponty claims that consciousness is physical, that it is incorporated in the body: 'It is essentially embodied' (Romdenh-Romluc 2011, 134). The selves of others are also 'embodied beings' which can be perceived by others. Since consciousness is bodily, and body is consciousness, it is also possible to experience other people's selves through observation. The researcher's bodily awareness is engaged through imitation of the participants' bodily movements. The bodily awareness of both researcher and participants is therefore involved in imitation.

The body experiences its surroundings through its senses, even before awareness makes us conscious of what is being experienced (the content of the experiences). This is called pre-reflexive awareness. This recognition is at the core of phenomenology of the body-based analysis. The researcher's use of her or his pre-reflexive awareness in order to analyse the participants' relationships, interactions and communication as well as watching, listening and thinking, is significant here. A pre-reflexive bodily awareness represents an expansion and an extra dimension in the analysis. Therefore, it becomes important to focus on bodily experience and for the researcher to use her or his awareness to feel and identify such pre-reflexive experience. The researcher's tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1958) is thus in a way made explicit. The non-verbal aspect of an experience is explored, and this gives a seemingly valuable depth to the analysis.

In their article on methods of materiality Aagaard and Matthiesen (2016, 33) challenges what they call "the hegemonic status of "language" as the primary substance of qualitative research in psychology". Instead of focusing only on analyzing linguistic meaning, researchers should think three-dimensionally, they suggest. This means for example paying attention to how participants who are talking together are positioned in relation to each other, and how material objects (like chairs, tables, papers) contribute to their experiences. Although we did not pay specific attention to material objects in our project, the participants' positioning in the room, their non-verbal language and bodily movements were focused in using imitation as a method. This does not mean that analysing (verbal) language and searching for linguistic meaning was not important. However, imitation implies paying attention to embodied experience, which is an inextricable part of lived experience. Thus, imitation may represent a valuable supplement to linguistic analyses.

Imitation resembles in some respects *re-enactment*, which refers both to a theory and to methods used in history, social science and for training in various professions. The theory of re-enactment proposed by Collingwood (1961, as quoted in Fay 1996, 139) implies that to understand intentional acts researchers “must “re-enact” an agent’s thoughts in his own mind”. However, there is a distinction between the intention *to do* something and the intention *in doing* something (Skinner 1972, referred in Fay 1996). The intention *to do* something is not necessarily the intention *in* what is done. While the intention to do something refers to the agent’s conscious motives an act may (also) embody intentions about which the agent is unaware or uncertain (Fay 1996, 140). In our experience, imitation seems to be helpful in understanding conscious motives (intentions-to-do something), but also intentions-in-doing something, including seemingly unconscious intentions.

As a method re-enactments are “embodied demonstrations of past events or scenes“ (Tutt and Hindmarsh 2011, 211). An interesting example is re-enactments used by researchers in analyzing video data. Tutt and Hindmarsh (2011) studied reenactments in data sessions as a way of demonstrating to colleagues in the group something that the re-enactor had seen in the video data that they were analyzing. This was done by imitating or enacting the on-screen conduct. The reenactments are not a direct reproduction of actions on-screen but a version of events that selects and often exaggerates certain features. Imitation in our project resembles reenactments in these data sessions in that it is not tied solely to the reproduction of verbal utterances, but also, and more importantly, like re-enactments, it captures “broader scenes and aspects of bodily conduct coupled with the talk” (Tutt and Hindmarsh 2011, 213). Further, imitation is, in resemblance with reenactments in data sessions, aimed at unveiling something that the researcher(s) have not been able to see in the data earlier. However, imitation differs from the

reenactment method used in data sessions in several ways. First, we use imitation as a *reproduction* of the actions on-screen, first of embodied actions without imitating the verbal language, then imitation of both verbal utterances and bodily positions and movements of each of the participants. Second, the aim of imitation is not to demonstrate directly something that we have seen in the data for fellow researchers in the analytical process, but to discover possible new aspects of data through using the researchers' (the imitator's) own embodied knowledge. Also, by describing in detail both what happens on the screen and what the researcher discovers during the acts of imitation, the link between data and the resulting interpretations is documented, first at an emic level, i.e. the intentions of the participants as understood by the researcher. Further, these interpretations serve as a basis for developing a theoretical understanding of what happens in the video recorded counselling sessions. At this level of analysis the researchers do not entirely stick to data, but make a qualitative "leap" into the theoretical realm by using existing theoretical knowledge and/or trying to develop new conceptualizations of the phenomena which has been studied (Maxwell 1992). In our project, we were not able to see what kind of theoretical understanding that could possibly be developed before imitation helped to detect some fleeting features and hidden structures in the data.

During the previous stages of our analyses, we gradually recognized that some phenomena were hard to see or spot. Imitation in our analyses resembles reenactments in data sessions in that it aims at unveiling something that is hard to see or understand directly. The reenactments at work in data sessions studied by Tutt and Hindmarsh (2011) were aimed at spotting specific characteristics of the original and present them to the colleagues and discuss them in the data sessions. Imitation is different in that the researcher imitates or re-produces a (relatively long) section of each participant's verbal language as well as gestures and other bodily movements in

the video, thereby trying to *reenact the participant's intentions-in-doing*. In this process the researcher's own embodied knowledge is activated.

There are many studies of gesture that aim at finding ways to render visible phenomena that are unavailable to or hidden from the recipient (or the researcher). Tutt and Hindmarsh (2011) mention Heath's (2002) study of doctor-patient interaction, which in some respects seem to parallel our study of interaction in counselling processes. In situations where the doctor's diagnosis in Heath's study did not appear to confirm the significance or severity of the problem, it could be seen how patients demonstrated their suffering through gesture and other bodily conduct. When imitating the teachers' (the counsel-seekers') bodily gestures in our study, it became clear that some of them felt that the counsellor's "diagnosis" of their problems and proposals concerning how the teachers could handle their situation, did not demonstrate real understanding of their experienced problems. Instead of saying this verbally, they demonstrated by their bodily language some characteristics of the problematic situations in their practice. Thus, they reenacted, – although probably unconsciously – some features of the problems in their practice as teachers. Thus, through imitation, a hidden phenomenon was unveiled that in our study could be theorized as parallel processes.

In our project imitation was introduced in the final stage of the analyses as an attempt to develop a more holistic understanding of the observed interaction processes than the earlier stages of analyses had given. In the study of re-enactments in data sessions presented by Tutt and Hindmarsh (2011) this method was used in the initial phases of analyses. It would be interesting to study how imitation could be used in other stages of the analytical process. In this project imitation might have been useful in the initial analytical phase; the method could perhaps have given 'a sense of the whole'ⁱ from the beginning, and thereby also prevented falling into 'the

coding trap'. In observation studies inspired by phenomenological hermeneutics, the analyses follow a circular principle. The methodological flexibility and creativity in qualitative analysis (Corbin and Strauss 2008) allows for analyses that do not follow a linear structure. It may be argued, therefore, that imitation could be used circularly and flexibly, as long as a scientifically sustainable process is followed.

In this project there was only one researcher collecting and analysing the data, including the imitation of participants, although each step was discussed with advisors and colleagues. It would be interesting to study the advantages and challenges of two (or more) researchers imitating the same participants. This could be a part of the validating process, but there is a range of theoretical and methodological issues to be discussed here, such as the significance of consensus versus disagreement among the imitators about the interpretation and understanding of the data. There is also the possibility that imitation is carried out by a researcher who has not participated in the collection of data, i.e. the observation, although we suppose that the advantages offered by imitation are greatest when the observer and the imitator is/are the same person(s).

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to discuss whether, how and why imitation of participants' verbal and – especially – non-verbal language can add to our understanding of interaction and communication in counselling processes. The phenomenology of the body was used as a theoretical underpinning of the method. This turned out to be a fruitful framework.

In this project, imitation of the participants' bodily language resulted in qualitatively new insights into the ways they interacted with each other in the counselling processes. By unveiling

parallel processes, imitation also gave new insight into the lived experiences of the teachers' relationships with children/pupils, parents and/or colleagues. Imitation of the participants' bodily language opened up ways for conceptualizing interactions in the counselling process as for instance confluence or retroflexion. Merely coding, categorizing and interpreting the video material did not give this holistic understanding. The holistic perspective that imitation represents corresponds to the aim of grasping the essence of a phenomenon in phenomenological research (Giorgi 2005; Van Manen 1990). Furthermore, the method provides access to the researcher's practical, bodily rooted knowledge, in accordance with basic concepts in phenomenology of the body, such as awareness and the idea that conceptualization of the world is based on bodily experience. The way this method gives access to the researcher's pre-reflexive knowledge is a further valid point. Imitation appears to be a way to elicit the researcher's tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1958), which is another central issue in the phenomenology of the body.

The conclusion is that using imitation as a method in analysis of counselling processes seems to enable researchers to access subtle or hidden features in the data and thereby give more thorough analyses of video observation data than when the analyses are based solely on seeing, listening, transcribing and thinking. Imitation leads to a greater degree of involvement, since the researcher's body, motor skills and movements also are involved. Actually imitating the movements of all participants provides a broader platform to capture their perspectives.

One weakness of this method may be that what actually emerges is the researcher's pre-understanding and pre-reflexive knowledge and not necessarily the 'truth' about (the participants' experiences of) the interactions. Nevertheless, within phenomenology there will always be ambiguity concerning what is perceived as the truth (Merleau-Ponty 1994). The

researcher's subjective perception of the phenomenon and the participants' experiences of it will not necessarily coincide. Thus, it is essential to be sensitive to the participants' experiences of the observed phenomenon.

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ⁱ The expression ‘a sense of the whole’ here refers to Giorgi’s method of phenomenological analysis, in which the first step aims at getting an initial sense of what the relevant piece of data (typically an interview) is all about.