

Ten core values underpinning relational research

By Linda Finlay and Ken Evans

While relational researchers vary somewhat in their specific theoretical/practice preferences, they are joined in their commitment to the research relationship where both parties are seen to be actively involved. Relational research does not just involve a participant-subject talking to a passive, distanced researcher who receives information. Instead the research data (and possibly the analysis stage as well) is seen to emerge out of a constantly negotiated, evolving, dynamic process. It is *co-created* – at least in part. Beyond this central idea lurk a number of core values and assumptions related to the researcher, the co-researcher, the research relationship and the research enterprise respectively. In this section we lay out what these relational values, arising out of the theories above, involve¹.

The list below does not constitute the ‘rule book’ about how relational researchers *should* behave. It is offered here to give orientation; to give a picture of the spirit of what we lean towards in our relational research encounters. Further, these values are not intended to be abstract, reified concepts like “equality” and “justice”. Instead, they are the values which need to be enacted in practice, in everyday research encounters (Walsh, 1995).

Values related to the researcher

- 1) **Owning oneself** – As researchers we need to accept our own humanness including our embodied way of being, emotions, interests, values, politics, frailties and strengths. We also need to have some understanding of where we come from in terms of our relational and social/cultural background. It is ourselves as a whole, after all, that we bring to any encounter. Levin (1985) recognises this when he says:

“As soon as we begin to move and gesture in response to the presence of the human Other, we are held by our culture in the corresponding beholdness of our bodies. In every human voice, there are echoes of the mother’s tongue, echoes of significant teachers, respected elders, close friends; and there are accents, too, which bind the voice to the history of a region, a culture, and generations of ancestors” (Levin, 1985, p.174).
- 2) **Integrity** – The relational researcher aims to be authentic, energised, active, transparent and reasonably direct in the research encounters. Unlike some versions of psychotherapy/counselling, relational researchers do not necessarily seek to be unconditionally accepting or neutral in their responses. Instead, they aim for integrity and honesty of responses; they’re prepared to challenge and disagree. For instance, where values collide such as when a co-researcher makes a racist or sexist remark, you might challenge the other’s view while keeping the dialogue open. The difficulty, as in the therapy context, is how to be congruent with your own values while being respectful of others’ different views.
- 3) **Reflexivity** – More than owning and sharing ourselves, we need to examine reflexively how our conscious and unconscious selves may be impacting upon the research process and outcomes. We need to be able to have enough awareness of and sift through our

¹ A comprehensive analysis of the values of relational therapy (rather than research) can be found in chapter 1 of de Young’s (2003) book *Relational Psychotherapy: a primer*. In this chapter de Young contrasts relational therapy against the medical model, Freudian therapy, Jungian therapy, short-term solution focused therapy, humanistic therapy, narrative therapy and radical feminist therapy.

personal experience of the relational encounter in order to decide what to respond to and what to put aside plus what to take to our supervisor or research mentor. Reflexivity is “more than self awareness in that it creates a dynamic process of interaction within and between our selves and our participants, and the data that informs decisions, actions and interpretations at all stages of research.” (Etherington, 2004, p.32). In particular, reflexivity exposes moral dilemmas and the relational researcher needs to try to monitor the research process for any ethical breaches such as where there is potential for abuse of power in the relationship.

Values related to the co-researcher

- 4) **Acceptance** - Relational researchers believe that the subjective experience of the co-researcher is *their* truth and this is the starting point of any exploration. The co-researcher’s expressions are both accepted (i.e., not morally judged) and assumed to reflect perceptions of their lifeworld. We accept (and assume) what is given is the other’s reality. Part of this acceptance is also acceptance of the co-researcher’s social/cultural background, taking seriously our respect of difference and diversity.
- 5) **Agency** - Relational researchers aim to honour the co-researcher’s choices and capacity for agency. We understand that the other’s way of being comes from their relational experience (past and present). At the same time we believe they are ‘response-able’ and they are able to make choices and, to a degree at least, can determine their own behaviour. In the research context, researchers try to ensure co-researchers are as self-directing as possible, even to the point of being involved in research decisions about both content and method. (Heron’s (1996) use of co-operative inquiry is a prime example where these ideas are fully embraced). In respecting others’ choices, researchers need to resist the temptation to control, direct, push and manipulate.
- 6) **Empathic inquiry** – The relational researcher has a responsibility to build a bridge to the co-researcher, using his or her own special awareness, skills, experience and knowledge (Evans and Gilbert, 2005). Our goal in research is to comprehend meaning from within clients’ own subjective frame of reference. Researchers strive to pay close attention to the other with curiosity, empathy and compassion, encouraging them to share their perspective. At the same time, differences between researcher and co-researcher are preserved so there is sufficient distance to challenge and be critically analytical where appropriate.

“I have that quality of attention so that I may be with you, alongside you, empathizing with you; and yet not losing myself in confluence with you because the dialogue between us both bridges and preserves our differences (Reason, 1988, p.219).

Values related to the research relationship

- 7) **Mutuality** – The relational research process involves reciprocal dialogue and participation during the data collection phase and possibly beyond during data analysis and writing up phases. It involves a “way of being with, without doing to” (Zinker and Nevis, 1994, p.395) It also may involve some mutual self-disclosure where researchers might proactively share aspects of themselves in response to co-researcher’s stories. This self-disclosure is seen as part and parcel of “mutual creative meaning-making” (Shaw, 2003, p.59).

While this mutuality is rarely symmetrical (and does not imply equality or sameness), it acknowledges that two people cannot be in relation without impacting on each other. The co-researcher's life experiences and ways of interacting with another will impact both consciously and unconsciously on the researcher, and vice versa. As a result, researcher and co-researcher will often find themselves going beyond understandings they had prior to their encounter. As Merleau-Ponty (1968, p.13) expresses it: "A genuine conversation gives me access to thoughts that I did not know myself capable of".

- 8) **Openness** – As we intertwine with another in a research encounter, we may find ourselves surprised, touched and awed by the connections we make and 'co-transferences'² we discover. The researcher needs to be alert to the possibility that the research encounter is likely to be a thickly populated microcosm involving multiple subjectivities and various co-transferences. The 'here and now' contains something of the 'there and then' where the selves of one person elicit those of the other. As relational researchers, we aim to open ourselves to these processes and whatever layered meanings might emerge in that intersubjective space between researcher and co-researcher. It takes courage to sit with uncertainty and not-knowing, and be open to what is emerging in the 'now' of the embodied dialogical encounter.

Values related to research outcomes

- 9) **Impact** - The primary goal of relational research is to *understand* something of the co-researcher's experience and/or social meanings (as opposed to aiming to predict, behaviour which is what quantitative researchers would be aiming for as they measure and manipulate behavioural variables). However, numerous additional outcomes may be involved – both intended and unintended. Relational research has the potential to be transformative in ways that might not initially be foreseen at both a proximal level (for the co-researcher) and at a distal level (impacting on others). While, relational research does not aim to change others, researchers have a responsibility to be mindful of their study's potential impact. Any research that encourages us to reflect on ourselves and the social world around us is likely to have some (if not huge) effects. If such power exists within our research, then that needs to be managed and respected. Whose interests does the research serve?
- 10) **Humility** - While relational researchers need to acknowledge the potential power of their research, at the same time they need to remain humble and modest. Research is *always* partial, tentative, emergent, dynamic, evolving and subject to new insights or interpretations. Relational researchers need to try to resist the urge to make larger claims on the basis of their one project or to generalise experience from, say, one idiographic account. At the same time, relational researchers hope that their relatively small scale study will offer particular insights and have wider resonance. The study might serve as a vignette, a pen portrait whose insights can be returned to, perhaps when readers are working with others in similar circumstances.

² Donna Orange (1995) amongst others advocates the use of the idea of **co-transferences** rather than transference and countertransference. We adopt this term here to indicate a more mutual relational process where both researcher and co-researcher are subject to transference and counter-transference.

A research example

The following illustration shows some of the values related to *embodied co-creation* in action, particularly reflexivity, openness, empathic inquiry, mutuality and impact. Here, the researcher (Linda) carried out some collaborative research with Pat (her friend and co-researcher) on her lived experience of receiving a new cochlear implant (Finlay and Molano-Fisher, 2007).

At the time of their research encounter Pat had been profoundly deaf and was learning to hear once more in terms of how to pick up and distinguish sounds, how to use her ears first rather than rely on the interpretation of visual clues. She found herself confronting a bewildering babble in a new world that was, as she put it, “so NOISY!”. Linda’s reflexive research diary entries catch something of what Pat was going through – and how her experience began to colour Linda’s own ways of perceiving:

“Together we went for walk in the woods. It was an extraordinary experience. Step by step, I found myself tuning into her world. We started playing a game. I would draw her attention to a noise: the sound of a bird singing, her dogs paws rustling up the leaves, a car passing, children laughing in the distance. It took a minute but she would eventually discriminate and hear the sound. “Oh, that’s what a xxx sounds like!”, she’d say. Slowly but surely as she memorised each sound, a new world opened up for her.

Pat proved to be a quick learner. Then she turned the tables on me. “What’s that?”, she’d ask. Sometimes I’d be able to answer. At other times, I had no idea. I was hearing new sounds myself! Slowly, I discovered my own perception changing just as Pat’s was changing. Previously I would have thought our walk in the woods been wonderfully peaceful and quiet. Now, I was seeing/hearing the world differently. What a cacophony: [birds, leaves rustling, cars, trains, voices]....Yes, it is an incredibly noisy world!” (Finlay and Molano-Fisher, 2007/2008, p.260).

Reflecting on this process, Linda recognised that for a brief period while in this participant observation, it felt as though she was ‘seeing’ the world through Pat’s ears. She was able to empathise with Pat’s own ‘colourfully noisy’ life worldly experience.

These insights formed the basis of a comprehensive analysis of Pat’s experience which Linda evolved collaboratively with Pat:

For fifty years Pat had lived her world through her senses in one particular way. Then, abruptly, everything changed. Whereas in the past she had been used to ‘seeing’ and thinking-through sounds, she now had to learn to *hear* sounds with her ears. This involved more than a simple cognitive-perceptual process by which Pat learned how to exercise selective attention and process new sensations. Rather, Pat found that her entire lifeworld (hitherto largely silent) had disappeared, to be replaced by a harsh, intrusive new domain of noise. Instead of being a ‘deaf person who lip reads’, she had become a ‘person with an implant who can sometimes hear things’. As those around her began expecting different things from her – and her own expectations about herself also changed - Pat confronted the challenge of re-orientating herself to a radically new world. The specific existential issues at stake for Pat concerned her somewhat daunting project to reconstruct a comfortable and valued self in the face of her changing lifeworld (Finlay and Molano-Fisher, 2007/8, p.261).

By attuning to Pat’s world Linda was able to begin to understand Pat’s experience and, together, they were able to mutually create meaning and produce their analysis. Beyond the research findings Linda was, paradoxically, enabled to go more deeply into her own embodied, grounded

and emotionally present way of being. Pat, too, was enabled to become more present to the impact of her new way of being. As Pat said in a subsequent communication to Linda:

Pat: "Use the experience we had together as much as you can. It is interesting and valuable. Remember it requires readiness and painful honesty; also respect for each other's skills. Not many people can handle this well. You could have roller coasted me and you didn't. I respect you for that. You can be as open as you want. [I] wish more people did what you did; not everybody has the same skills. Without you my story might not have been told... Ethics is more than the mere rules, what we did was fascinatingly difficult believe me, and we ended up not only with the end product but many other things as well." (Personal communication from Pat to Linda)

Co-creation indeed.