

CHAPTER FOUR

THE STUDY

4.1 Methodological Orientation

The approach to the present study is qualitative, as reflected by the research question: “What is the experience of letting go?” The question asked requires a descriptive answer rather than a quantitative study of measurements and statistical deductions. The intention is to seek to understand the phenomenon of letting go, rather than attempting to control or predict what it is; to explicate its meaning and reveal its structure.

Traditional scientific research methods have their limitations, and are inappropriate in determining the structure or constituents of the experience of letting go. A traditional scientific approach would pursue the already established paradigms, theories and definitions, while attempting, perhaps, to measure the phenomenon quantitatively. Rather than employ a quantitative approach and work deductively, letting go will be approached as a human phenomenon that needs to be understood phenomenologically and approached inductively, with the attitude of discovery from a scientific, yet human, psychological perspective. Giorgi (1975) has indicated that a human science of “psychology can still be practised with rigor and discipline and yet do justice to all human psychological phenomena”(p.82).

The present study uses data obtained in the form of spontaneous descriptions regarding conscious awareness of the experience of letting go, as it appears in the life-world of the research participants. The study is psychological, and does not emulate the natural sciences to confirm to an *a priori* definition of the experience under investigation. The methodological approach is open-ended, and there is no specific, predetermined idea of the outcome, for “psychology should be the study of experience and behaviour as it is experienced and behaved” (Giorgi, 1970, p.165). In his or her idiosyncratic *Dasein* or being-in-the-world, each individual is considered unique, and this has to be taken into account (Tageson, 1982). *Dasein* and the world are so interrelated that we cannot refer

to the one without referring to the other. Our life is always structured in terms of the world in which we live.

Research conducted to date reveals the concept of separation rather than letting go as dominant. A plethora of studies have been conducted in the area of separation, a word often viewed synonymously with letting go, but the quest is to discover what letting go is. Is letting go just separation, an identified construct used in our objectified world? There is the suggestion that the term embodies more than the confines of its definitions for the essence and meaning of what it means to let go remain unexplored. Whether the terms letting go and separation are synonymous, or linked, needs to be explored, elucidated and understood.

Over the last thirty-seven years, separation-individuation theory appears as the prevailing paradigm used in developmental psychology. Particularly during the 1980's, instruments were designed to assess the aspects of separation and individuation. These include the Separation-Individuation Process Inventory (Christianson & Wilson); Adolescent Separation Anxiety Inventory (Hansburg); Psychological Separation Inventory (Hoffman) and Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence (Levine et al.) While some of these measures were refined during the 1990's, the studies continue to be primarily of a quantitative nature, with the vast majority of the research studies completed relating predominantly to adolescence (Kroger, 1998).

Although the studies conducted have not specifically focused on the theme of letting go, many do have merit. The present study intends to explore the experience of letting go and contribute to the existing findings regarding separation and its implications. We need to bridge the gap between psychological facts and everyday living. In the words of Giorgi (1970) “no science is completely removed from everyday life, and some kind of dialogue with everyday life must go on” (p.86). The intention with this study is to promote this dialogue and discover the meaning of a significant letting-go experience as it occurs in the life-world of individuals. The purpose of this study is not to define separation, but to discover and describe the structure of the experience of letting go. The implicit experience needs to be explicated and understood. Neither an external

validation, nor an external perspective outside the experience is required, but a dialogue between the world of experience and the world of psychological fact.

Giorgi (1970) attests that when studying human phenomena, a human scientific approach is required. The focus of the present research is the human experience of letting go from an existential-phenomenological perspective. With the use of the human scientific approach, as explicated by Giorgi, I hope to discover and describe the structure of the experience. With its adherence to scientific principles and its view of man, the phenomenological research method will be used.

4.2 Phenomenological Research

The intention of this section is not to expound on the philosophy and psychology of phenomenology, but to focus on the concepts and methods regarding the structural approach to be used in this study regarding phenomenological research.

Phenomenological research is descriptive and qualitative, yet differs from other qualitative approaches in that attention is paid to the experienced meaning of the phenomenon under investigation, rather than to descriptions of visible actions and behaviour (Polkinghorne, 1989, p.44). Phenomenological research focuses on human experience: it is not a direct report of the experience, but a search for the structural meaning of the experience: “It’s always the experienced phenomenon that is being referred to. The aim of the researcher is to discover and describe the structure of the given as experienced ” (Giorgi, 1989b, p.41).

To understand the experience of letting go, we concern ourselves with the phenomenon in the conscious world of everyday living, what Husserl identified as the life-world or *Lebenswelt*: “The life-world is not a construct of consciousness: It is co-constituted or co-created in the dialogue of person and world” (Valle, King & Halling, 1989, p.9). This is the world as given in awareness and immediately expressed, rather than interpreted scientifically. In order to understand the phenomenon, we employ Husserl’s maxim and

go “back to the things themselves” (Giorgi, 1985, p.8). We return to the things as they actually appear in everyday living, and allow the phenomena to speak for themselves.

Phenomenological research does not assume or predict meanings. It favours a transcendental, rather than a natural attitude. By adopting this perspective, the aim was not to deny the existence of the natural world, but rather to suspend our usual beliefs and manner of perceiving. Husserl asserts that “an epistemological investigation that can seriously claim to be scientific must satisfy the principle of freedom from suppositions” (Moustakas, 1994, p.45). Through a process of phenomenological reduction, personal preconceived ideas and beliefs must be suspended and held in abeyance, thereby making it possible for the researcher to become receptive and open to perceiving the phenomenon as it exists in its context, as given in awareness. That the researcher suspends his beliefs, avoiding any *a priori* definition of the experience being investigated, is what Husserl considers the first step in the method of the phenomenological *epoché*. (Polkinghorne, 1989; Kruger, 1988; Sherman, 1987).

Using a phenomenological approach, the present research is interested in understanding the experienced reality of the letting go phenomenon in, as Giorgi (1970) purports, an *accurate*, rather than an *objective* manner. The aim is not to seek causes, or to predict or control the phenomenon, but to understand the experience in its immediacy. With respect to the phenomenon, a comprehensive understanding will be sought, where the “primary aim is to observe, comprehend and render explicit what was initially perceived” (Kruger, 1988, p.143).

The quest is to understand the “what” rather than the “why” of the lived experience and to reveal the structure or essence of letting go as it is given in awareness. As the structure of the phenomenon is that which is common throughout its diverse appearances, a number of specific situational experiences of letting go were explored. According to Giorgi (1970), “it is precisely structure that is the reality that one responds to at the phenomenal level” (p.179). Structure is revealed to us as meaning: “Through description, the pre-reflective life-world is brought to the level of reflective awareness where it manifests itself as psychological meaning” (Valle, King, & Halling 1989, p.14).

4.3 Research Participants

The focus is on the nature of the experience itself, but it is the research participants who have made the study possible. Not only was it impossible to separate the phenomenon from the one who was experiencing it, but it would also have been meaningless to do so (Fisher, 1989). The meaning of letting go has to be illuminated as a lived experience in human development.

In my exploratory attempts regarding the sample and context for this study, I consistently found myself caught between two paradigms, viz. that of the natural attitude and that of phenomenology. I was split between the external reality of the quantitative research completed on separation, my own interest in the phenomenon, and my desire to understand its experiential meaning. While diverse information became available, I felt conflicted regarding the polarities of the paradigms. Gradually, however, I realised that I would focus on the phenomenon itself. My intention was not to identify or describe the characteristics of a group who had lived the experience, but to discover and explicate the structure of letting go as experienced in the life-world of individuals. A number of participants were willing to describe their experience and give their story. In an effort to remain faithful to the phenomenon, no particular theoretical framework is adhered to, nor any statistical generalisations made. The approach to the study is from a phenomenological perspective, and in my attempt to answer the question: “What is the experience of letting go?”, I hope to extend existing psychological knowledge in the field.

Polkinghorne (1989) proposes that the first requirement when selecting research participants is that the “subject has had the experience”. The research participants selected have to be able to provide a rich, sensitive and full description, although they may still be in the process of the experience. Like Richard Alapack (1984) in his study on leaving home, I decided to work with participants who had either had the experience, or were in the process of the experience. I accepted the transitional and temporal implications of letting go, and was willing to interview research participants who were still in the process of the experience. I believed that it would provide me with a more

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rich and revealing description. Though I chose to adhere to Alapack's approach regarding the phenomenon as transitional, the following criteria proposed by Clark Moustakas (1994) were accepted as basic requirements:

- the research participant is intensely interested in understanding the nature and meanings of the phenomenon;
- the research participant is willing to participate in a lengthy interview and perhaps a follow-up interview;
- the research participant grants the investigator the right to tape-record and possibly even to videotape the interview;
- the research participant grants the investigator the right to publish the data in a dissertation and other publication (p.107).

In my quest to find volunteer research participants (hereafter referred to simply as participants), colleagues and friends were approached regarding my interest in the letting-go phenomenon. The volunteers who made themselves available were initially contacted telephonically, and, once their interest and suitability had been confirmed, they were briefly informed of the research design. Following the call, an orientation-invitation letter (see Form A: Appendix), together with the 'Consent Form' (see Form B: Appendix) was sent to them. Each participant was assured of confidentiality and anonymity regarding personal information. The structural format employed by Mike Trumbull (Moustakas, 1994) in his correspondence with participants, was modified appropriately and utilised.

The participants are volunteers who, from their own life-world context, willingly identified with the letting-go phenomenon. Each participant had either lived through the experience, or was in the process of living through a significant letting-go experience, and the research makes an attempt to bring the participants' phenomenal level to a phenomenological level. The participants were not patients, and I was free to listen to their stories in an unbiased, non-judgemental manner, with no theoretical framework in mind. The term letting go is often used in the process of therapy. Through the years, while a number of diverse life-situations (e.g. forgiveness, ageing, gender, identity,

relationships and other issues) can be recalled, in the course of my practice, letting go reveals itself ubiquitously in a number of stories and situations. For the study, however, rather than confine the phenomenon to a specific situational experience, I decided to explore the phenomenon as it appears in the life-world at large. The field remained wide open, and the choice regarding situational context would depend on the participants who would provide a contextualisation of the personal meaning and essence of the experience of letting go.

4.4 Pilot study

In their phenomenologically orientated research, William Fisher (1989) and Richard Alapack (1975; 1984) make use of written descriptions. My initial request to three research volunteers was for written descriptions of situations regarding a significant letting-go experience. The descriptions were varied in length, and revealed a fairly organised depiction, rather than a lived account of their experience. The reports received also appeared somewhat distant and reflective in nature. It was at this point that I recalled the words of Levinas (1979) who writes: “The other is not an object that must be interpreted and illumined by my alien light. He shines forth with his own light and *speaks for himself*” (p.14). I realised that in my intention to reduce bias and misinterpretation, I had to create the opportunity for the participants to speak for themselves. Besides, there is an undeniable difference between the written and the spoken word. According to Stevick (1971), though participants may adopt a reflective stance during the interview, they are nevertheless as close to the lived experienced as possible. A first-hand account of the experience had to be provided, and the spoken word took precedence, particularly as some of the participants were still in the process of the letting-go experience.

Susan Chase (1995) refers to Livia Polanyi’s distinction regarding stories and reports. We are encouraged to listen to life stories, rather than to read and accept reports. Chase writes: “If we want to hear stories rather than reports, then our task as interviewers is to invite others to tell their stories, to encourage them to take responsibility for the meaning of their talk” (p.3). Rather than accept a report, the story of the experience had to be told.

Similarly, Levinas (1979) acknowledges the value of speech above the written word when he writes: “Better than comprehension, *discourse* relates with what remains essentially transcendent...Speech cuts across vision” (p.195). Levinas firmly believes that what has been “said” or written totalises and confirms predetermined ideas, whereas “saying” in the presence of the other liberates and reveals the truth. It is through the presence of the other that we are able to enter the infinite and be liberated from the confines of predetermined ideas. The truth of letting go had to be allowed to speak for itself.

While revealing their stories, people make sense of their experience and communicate meaning. In the words of Josselson (1995):

Meaning is not inherent in an act of experience, but is constructed through social discourse. Meaning is generated by the linkages the participant makes between aspects of her life as lived and by the explicit linkages the researcher makes between this understanding and interpretation, which is meaning constructed at another level of analysis (p.32).

With his investigation into anger, Stevick (1971) purports that: “Method and phenomenon must dialogue”. He asks the researcher to consider “What method will best allow the full emergence of the phenomenon in all its aspects: the situation, the behaviour and experience of the subject?” (p.135). My method of choice became clear. I would invite the participants to a face-to-face interview and listen to a verbal account of their experience. With the initial attempt, each interview was opened with the broad statement:

More than likely you have had to let go of someone or something significant (in your life). Please describe for me in as much detail as possible your experience of letting go and what it was like for you. I am interested in your personal experience – your thoughts, feelings and behaviour. Perhaps it is something that you are still faced with. Whatever it is, I would like to hear about it. Please describe any situation related to this experience. I would like a clear and detailed description of your experience of letting go.

Responses from participants revealed a broad interpretation of the above, with a number of letting-go experiences being revealed within each protocol. In the absence of defined

parameters, my attempt not to predetermine the situation of the experience made it difficult to contain the phenomenon under investigation. It became evident that letting go invariably reverberates, affecting numerous aspects of one's life. It was decided that though the choice of a situated experience would remain with the participant, reference to a specific situation had to be incorporated. The statement preceding the research interview was reviewed and modified as follows:

More than likely you have had to let go of someone or something significant (in your life). Please can you describe as accurately and concretely as possible, a *specific situation* of your experience of letting go and what it was like for you – your thoughts, feelings and behaviour. Perhaps it is something that you are still faced with. Whatever it is I would like to hear about it. I would like a clear and accurate description of a *specific situation* regarding your experience of letting go.

4.5 Interviews

4.5.1 Research Interview

In my attempt to understand the experience of their world, I decided to read the preceding statement to the participants and listen to their story. For the study, I used a semi-structured life-world interview which, according to Kvale (1996), is “an interview whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to the meaning of the described phenomena” (pp. 5/6). Letting go was the phenomenon to be explored in a qualitative manner, and the qualitative research interview was the method used to collect the descriptions (data): “The qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to any scientific explanations” (p.1). This description is in harmony with the philosophy of phenomenological psychology and a natural choice for the purpose of this study.

The interview remained open-ended and was receptive to the participant's full story. Each participant was allowed to express himself freely and was not stunted in the personal meanings that were allowed to emerge. While attempting to contain the experience to the specific situation identified by the participant, I engaged in the

phenomenological *epoché* (first level of bracketing) and resisted any temptation to contribute to the original meanings presented. While the focus remained on the experience with letting go as central theme, I listened carefully and attentively to each participant's story.

The qualitative interview is an informal and interactive research method that extends beyond the spontaneous exchange of views found in daily conversation. It is an open-ended conversation, where misconceptions can be clarified as they occur. The interviewer/ researcher must create a relaxed and trusting atmosphere where the interviewee/ participant can be open and honest. Forming an empathic alliance is crucial, as the interviewer/researcher observes, listens and attempts to elucidate the meanings of the experience described (Kvale, 1995; Polkinghorne, 1989).

The search was for a description of the experience. Descriptions are crucial to understanding the life-world of the individual for, as Giorgi (1986) explicates, “a description is the use of language to articulate the objects of experience” (p.4). Elsewhere he attests that “from a phenomenological viewpoint descriptions can serve as legitimate data” (p.14). As researcher, my focus was to ascertain the lived meaning of the phenomenon for the participant, through the words and sentences used to convey meaning. During the interview, the natural language of the participants was used, while the descriptions provided were transcribed and serve as the data.

4.5.2 Follow-up interview

To avoid misinterpretation and facilitate the clarification of meaning, a follow-up interview was conducted with two of the participants (M and B), who were asked to elaborate on their original meanings. The following statement preceded the follow-up interview:

In my attempt to understand the description you presented, there were certain aspects of the situation that were still not quite clear to me. Would you kindly read the transcribed interview aloud from the beginning and where I have, in colour, highlighted certain sentences, kindly elaborate further and explain exactly what it is you mean.

During the follow-up interview, I was careful to protect the phenomenon experienced by the participant, and not to include additional information (via verbalisations), from my own interpretations, which could influence the participants' original meaning relating to the phenomenon.

In his study on anxiety, Fisher (1982) believes it helpful to conduct a follow-up interview and indicates that: "this procedure of having the subject read his/her original description helps to situate the subject back in the situation that was experienced and thus facilitates the recall of finer details" (p. 67). Though I followed the same procedure as Fischer, rather than focusing on predetermined questions, I chose to highlight those aspects that were not clear to me in the transcript of the original interview. In reading the transcript, the participant's own spontaneous elaboration was possible.

4.5.3 Interview Review

Subsequent to the interviews shared, all participants were contacted and asked about their experience regarding the original research interview. Four of the participants were approached telephonically, while the one participant, who had emigrated, was contacted via email. The follow-up communication served the dual purpose of (1) ascertaining whether the participants felt that they had been adequately understood, and (ii) determining whether any of the participants would require follow-up assistance. The email forwarded to the one participant provided an opportunity for additional descriptions regarding his experience of letting go, as he was still in the process. A personal thank-you letter to each participant followed.

4.6 Data Explication and Data Analysis

Van Kaam (1966) and Rahilly (1993) note that interpreting naïve experiences from the life-world as scientific knowledge presents epistemological difficulties, but it is only through expression that experience can become knowledge. It is through meaning that the structure of an experience is revealed as we describe our awareness of the experience.

Husserl expounds that in the process of reduction, the phenomenological researcher moves from the naïve expressive descriptions obtained, through the eidetic *epoché* (second level of bracketing) to the structural description, where naïve and diffuse knowledge is made clear through science (Polkinghorne, 1989). Van Kaam (1966) elucidates as follows: “ Science formulates explicitly what was experienced implicitly in awareness” (p.305). It is this process of explication that grasps the essential structure and constituents of a phenomenon.

The scientific phase of the explication is the data analysis. In the manner proposed by Giorgi (1975), data analysis is applied to the current study. Fisher (1974), Karlsson (1993), de Koning (1979), Wertz (1983), Stevick (1971) and Bargdill (2000) have employed similar ways of doing research, and their influence is evident in the present analysis. Polkinghorne (1989) extends the four essential steps described by Giorgi (1975, 1985, 1989a) to six. For the purpose of this study, however, the following steps will be followed:

4.6.1 Sense of the Whole

The transcribed language from the interview served as the data. The data was read and re-read to obtain a sense of the whole, while the transcribed interviews required a number of readings (Giorgi, 1985). With the aid of bracketing, the gestalt or whole was allowed to emerge, for, by understanding the meaningful whole, the essence of the phenomenon was able to reveal itself. No theoretical explanatory model was imposed, and it is by grasping the whole description that the relationships among the parts could be understood. Giorgi adopts the gestalt-phenomenological perspective, advising the researcher to neither question nor make explicit the general sense obtained. This initial step served as a basis for the following step.

4.6.2 Natural Meaning Units

From reading the data (descriptions), natural meaning units emerged, and the text was divided where a shift in meaning was discerned. With each concrete transition in

meaning, the whole was differentiated into manageable, coherent units, where the partial meanings made up the totality. The meaning units vary in length, as the data was differentiated in a spontaneous, rather than in an empirical, manner. Bracketing continued, for “the phenomenological approach is discovery orientated rather than hypothesis testing” (Giorgi, 1989 b, p.49). According to Polkinghorn (1989): “meaning units are constituents of the experience, not elements, in that they retain their identity as contextual parts of the subject’s specific experience” (p. 54). With the present study, while retaining the narrative sequence in the subject’s own original language, the initial description was re-written in the third-person singular.

4.6.3 Central Themes

Each meaning unit was re-examined in terms of its relevance and significance to letting go. Central themes were established and, in an unbiased manner, attempts were made to identify the dominant meaning of each unit. While redundancies were considered irrelevant material, the implicit psychological aspects of each meaning unit was made explicit. From a psychological perspective, the participant’s descriptions were rephrased in simple language.

4.6.4 Situated Constituents

The researcher reflected upon and interrogated each central meaning unit in terms of the specific purpose of the study, viz. “What is the experience of letting go?” With respect to the phenomenon under investigation, the essence of that situation for the participant is revealed and understood. Repetitive themes and descriptions within the meaning units that were not relevant to the letting-go experience were eliminated. The remaining themes were addressed and transformed in psychological language, and the meaning implied by the participant was made explicit. An “empathic immersement was obviously involved throughout”, as the description was amplified from an existential baseline (Wertz, 1983, p.212). The psychological statements reflect the participant’s intended meaning, where what is implicitly stated in the original description was made explicit.

4.6.5 Situated Narrative Description (SND)

The meaning units transformed into psychological language were tied together and synthesised into a consistent description of non-redundant and essential psychological themes. The Individual Situated Structure includes the concrete and specific aspects of the situation of letting go that answers the question: “What is the psychological structure of letting go as it is presented to the participant in this particular situation?” The Situated Narrative Description provides condensation of the meanings expressed into essential constituents regarding the contextual situation of letting go, and while the narrative is sequential in nature, its value is psycho-logical rather than chronological. The Situated Narrative Description (SND) was preparatory to the General Situated Structure (GSS) of each protocol and the General Psychological Structure (GPS) of all the protocols.

4.6.6 General Situated Structure (GSS)

Having completed the individual situated description (ISS), a general level (situated) description was developed from each protocol. At this point, the aspects of letting go that emerged became the central focus: while the particulars of the specific situation (of the protocol) were omitted, the aspects of the experience that are descriptive of letting go in general were included. Though not universal, the descriptions claim a general validity that goes beyond the specific situation (Giorgi, 1975).

4.6.7 General Psychological Structure (GPS)

The general structure of letting go is the descriptive answer to the question: “What is the experience of letting go?” The general description of the structure of the phenomenon requires that the above steps (4.6.1 – 4.6.6) are first used for the data analysis of each protocol, starting with the one description (protocol) of the experience, followed by the other protocols. Each protocol was analysed individually, as the eidetic *epoché* (second level bracketing) was applied to allow for emerging themes, while the inductive method moved from a specific to a universal validity. Like Wertz’s (1979) study on criminal victimisation, the General Psychological Structure (GPS) was developed directly from each of the protocols or Individual Situated Structure (ISS). From the transcriptions, the

structural unity of the experience was made explicit. The explorations from the ISS of each participant often already shifted towards statements of what was essential to all imagined experiences. Formulating the GPS required a back-and-forth search among the original transcriptions, the psychological reflections of each protocol, as well as the ISS. The focus was to reveal the constituents that are essential to all experiences of letting go, and diverse experiences were grouped under one general statement. The constituents finally expressed in the GPS are present in every protocol, as well as in every possible experience of letting go that can be imagined. In other words, in moving towards the GPS, what is implicit in the original descriptions is made explicit. According to Wertz (1983), the final GPS includes “both the necessary and sufficient conditions, constituents and structural relations which constitute the phenomenon in general, that is all instances of the phenomenon under consideration” pp.234 -235). Themes that are generally held true of each protocol appear and emerge as the GPS, as the essence of the letting-go experience is finally distilled. (Fisher & Wertz, 1979; Van Kaam, 1966; Rahilly, 1993).

4.6.8 Structural Synthesis (SS)

The Structural Synthesis provides a synthesis of what is essential to the General Psychological Structure.

4.7 Conclusion

“Structure is made present to us through meaning” (Valle & Halling, 1989, p.14). The telos of the data analysis is to remain true to each participant’s description of the experience. Throughout the data analysis, rather than attempt to translate the experience into a theoretical system, the eidetic *epoché* is consistently applied. While traditional scientific methods move from universal validities to specific ones, the phenomenological method used in the present study is inductive, shifting from a specific to a universal validity. It is in the explication of the data analysis that the implicit awareness of the phenomenon and experience of letting go is made explicit in scientific knowledge. In the words of Van Kaam (1966): “By explication, implicit awareness of a complex phenomenon becomes explicit, formulated knowledge of its components” (p.305).