**Body-focused interviewing: Corporeal experience in phenomenological inquiry.**

**Author:** Jennifer Frank Tantia, PhD, Adelphi University

**Biography:** Jennifer Frank Tantia, PhD is a clinical somatic psychotherapist and dance/movement therapist in private practice in New York City. She teaches developmental and somatic psychology at Adelphi University, and serves as a research advisor for Pratt Institute dance/movement therapy graduate students. Dr. Tantia currently serves as Research Chair for the United States Association of Body Psychotherapy and is the United States liaison for the Scientific Committee of the European Association for Body Psychotherapy. Her research on Authentic Movement and the autonomic nervous system has been published and presented in both the US and Europe. For more information, please see: www.soma-psyche.com or https://adelphi.academia.edu/JenniferTantia

**Relevant Disciplines:** Psychology, Anthropology, Education, Health, Nursing, Sociology, Social Policy, Social Work, Counseling, Creative Arts Therapy and Expressive Arts Therapy, Occupational Therapy.

**Academic Level:** Graduate and Postgraduate

**Methods Used:** Interviews, Phenomenology

**Keywords:** qualitative methodology, embodied interview, intuition, sensation, memory, nonverbal communication, gestures, embodiment, phenomenology, metaphor

**Link to Research Output:** http://search.proquest.com/docview/1430510485


**Abstract**

The following is an original interview method that was designed for my PhD dissertation in clinical psychology. This study inquired into psychotherapists’ embodied experiences of clinical intuition while working with patients. In the course of the study I found that an unconventional form of interviewing was needed to capture the subtle nuances of nonverbal communication that often accompanied participants’ descriptions of a complex phenomenon. Previous studies of embodied experiences often relied on metaphor to describe the gestalt of embodied experience. By evoking embodied awareness from my participants and illuminating the nonverbal movements that accompanied their words, my interview method provided data that was more closely aligned with experience than metaphor. I also discovered additional, vital information about the ways in which gestures both augment narrative as well as reveal
unconscious information about a phenomenon, especially when the gestures appear to be discordant with the participant’s words. This style of interview may assist in phenomenological explorations across disciplines, and can be useful for inquiries of complex phenomena such as trauma, sexuality, oppression, and to understand more deeply the experiences of specific populations such as disabled individuals, at-risk youth, or elder populations.

Learning Outcomes

This case provides an account of an interview method I created for my doctoral dissertation in 2013. I provide a description of how to conduct the interview, as well as some of the caveats that accompany the execution of such an interview. By the end of the case you should have the ability:

- To comprehensively understand how to conduct a body-focused interview
- To discern the difference between metaphoric description and embodied description
- To identify the methodological challenges involved in using embodied inquiry as a form of phenomenological interviewing
- To be able to debate the pros and cons of conducting a body-focused interview

Project Overview and Context

What is Embodiment?

Researchers in fields such as psychology, sociology, health psychology, anthropology, cognitive science, medicine and neuroscience have constructed definitions for embodiment that suit each particular field’s understanding of the phenomenon. Due to the Cartesian nature of traditional scientific research, descriptions for embodiment continue to separate mind from body, which only reinforce their separateness even while attempting to integrate them. For instance, mindfulness, a popular term often used synonymously with embodiment, typically represents
only half of this experience. Whereas mindfulness is the act of attending to one’s bodily experience, embodiment is “the enlivened response to that attention,” (Tantia, 2013).

Embodiment is a term that is similar to the word soma. “Soma” is derived from Greek origins, and describes more than just a body, but also the consciousness that is experienced from within one’s body and arrives into awareness through the senses. Philosopher Richard Shusterman, in his book “Body Consciousness” uses the example of pleasure to explain the concept of embodiment as a whole, integrated, simultaneous concept that is quite different from the currently known, body/mind connection. He writes, “Most pleasure or enjoyment does not have the character of specifically, narrowly localized body feeling (unlike a toothache or a stubbed toe)” (p. 42). Like pleasure, embodiment is a gestalt of experience that encompasses at least three simultaneous experiences:

### Embodiment as a Form of Healing

Wilhelm Reich introduced somatic awareness as a means toward health in the 1930’s. Since then, somatic psychotherapy -- a form of psychotherapy that includes the integrated experience of the patient’s thoughts, emotions and sensorial experiences in the body – has honored embodied experience as an integral part of the psychotherapeutic experience. Later, in the 1960’s Eugene Gendlin created a form of embodied inquiry called Focusing that, when used in psychotherapy, offered patients the opportunity to pay attention to their embodied experiences
while speaking. This caused them to slow down or pause their narrative to inquire how their bodies were responding to their own words. In other words, rather than talking about their experiences, patients were instructed to feel what was happening in their bodies as they spoke. Gendlin called this the “felt sense.” Gendlin created this concept during a study done with Carl Rogers in 1957, which found that patients who brought attention to the felt sense experienced a reduction in psychiatric symptoms that lasted longer than traditional “talk” therapy. Adding awareness of the embodied state to the therapy process helped patients to glean insights in ways that was not previously available. Today, most forms of somatic psychotherapy invite patients to attend to their felt sense as part of the psychotherapy session.

Why Use Embodiment in Research?

Embodiment in Research Captures the Lived Experience

Finding the layers of experience beneath words is an aspect of phenomenology that has been sorely missing in qualitative research. Embodiment has thus far been conceptualized from an “object-observer” perspective in traditional social science research. This perspective is remiss when it comes to describing the felt sense from within the body. The lived body, or lieb as Husserl called it, is not the observation of the body’s behavior, nor can it be adequately expressed in metaphor, but necessitates description as it happens during the qualitative interview.

Only within the past decade have researchers such as Les Todres, Reinhard Stelter and Laura Ellingson illuminated the importance of embodiment in the qualitative interview. Todres and Stelter have advocated for the use of Focusing as a method for qualitative inquiry, and have been keen to use this process to find meaning-making in the interview. Ellingson contributes a philosophical view of embodiment that necessitates the researcher’s embodied experience, and embodied/nonverbal communication between researcher and participant. Her approach even
introduces the importance of analyzing diversities among genders and cultures related to embodied experience. The valuable insights these scholars offer is but the beginning of an exciting new dialogue among embodiment researchers that I hope continues to develop.

*Embodied Description is Closer to Phenomena than Metaphor*

Emotions are difficult to describe, and are often limited to metaphor. For example, in psychotherapy practice, I once asked a patient how she felt when she thought about her new fiancé. I then observed her behaviours as she organized her thoughts prior to speaking. She shifted in her seat, looked away from me, stumbled on her words, and then brought her hand to her chin. She then said, “I feel like a little puppy when I am with him.” If I were simply interpreting her words, I might think about what “like a puppy” feels like to me: jumpy, hyperactive, salivating, and happy. However, upon further questioning, when I asked her what it felt like in her body to be a puppy, I discovered something completely different. As a researcher seeking embodied data, you might ask something like this:

Researcher: *I see that your body shifted, and you moved your gaze when you said, “like a puppy.” What do you experience in your body when you feel like a puppy? Are there sensations or movements in your body, or perhaps an emotion or thought that accompanies that?*

As it turned out, her response to a similar question was very different from my initial interpretation. Her description of “like a puppy” was synonymous with soft, warm, snuggly and safe. Using my own interpretation of the participant’s experience would have skewed the data that was collected. If I had already interpreted the participant’s embodied experience and recorded that as data, then I would have been interpreting my own interpretation in data analysis!

*Embodied Description Includes Gestures that Reveal Unconscious Knowledge*
In the original study, when I asked a participant what happens when he has an intuitive experience with a patient, he said (and did!) the following:

Participant: *I don’t know where it comes from, but... (Participant brings his right palm to face the right side of his head. His right hand waves toward and away from the right side of his head while he speaks).*

This is a good example of how the participant’s gestures were discordant with his words. Gestures that are discordant with words provide glimpses into another layer of the participant’s consciousness. Such glimpses provide valuable data, and can be used to determine further information about an investigated phenomenon that is beyond words. In the example above, the participant was saying that he didn’t know where his intuitive “hit” came from, yet his actions were gesturing toward the right side of his head. This particular gesture was consistent among all participants and gave me, the researcher, a possible view of how the unconscious is at work during intuitive experience. In relation to the original study, eight of nine participants made the same gesture in relation to where intuition might come from. Further information about the results are beyond the scope of this case, but the full study can be found at:

http://search.proquest.com/docview/1430510485

**Research Practicalities**

I began the study with several test interviews by phone that yielded vague information. For example, one test participant who expressed absolute confidence in her ability to recognize intuition in her practice, repeatedly stated, “It’s energy! You know…energy!” This did not fulfil my desire for detailed description, so after six additional unsatisfactory phone interviews I intuitively sensed that I needed to collect data in-person, even though I did not know why that felt important.
I conducted one additional trial interview, this time in person, and video recorded it. I noticed while reviewing the video that I became drawn not only to the interviewee’s words, but to how she was describing her experience nonverbally. I observed how when a topic is difficult to describe, gestures facilitate thinking. This prompted me to begin to watch the dialogue between her words and gestures, which revealed information about her experience that was not accessible through words alone. At that time I was already using Focusing in my work as a somatic psychotherapist. Now I suddenly realized that I could translate somatic psychotherapy techniques into a method for data collection. This is how I arrived at the Body-focused Interview.

- **Participant Sample Selection**

  For the original study, I used purposive sampling to find nine somatically-based licensed psychotherapists who had been practicing for at least five years. Participants’ backgrounds were from clinical psychology, psychiatry, and social work, and all were required to have additional training in a somatic psychotherapy modality, such as Dance/movement Therapy, Focusing, Somatic Experiencing, and Hakomi. I screened participants based on a) whether they have had intuitive experiences that they felt in their bodies, b) if they felt comfortable describing their embodied experiences and c) if they would be willing to be video recorded. All selected participants responded positively to each of these questions. In addition, I asked all potential participants if they have had severe traumatic experience in which they felt that their life was in danger. Those who responded positively were excluded from the study, as flashbacks and traumatic memories may re-emerge unexpectedly due to the ways in which trauma is stored unconsciously in body memory. Interviews took place in the United States between 2012 and 2013, and were video recorded in the participants’ offices.
• Methodological Issues

I learned quickly that somatic psychotherapists were more interested in exploring than “being explored,” and that they tended to be shy when it came to describing their present-body experiences. For instance, when I would point out a gesture that seemed significant, participants would stop the gesture or change the subject. They also felt self-conscious about the topic itself. While explaining an intuitive moment, many of them said things like, “I must sound crazy! If I were just telling you this in a casual conversation on the street, I feel like they would come and lock me up!” Despite participants’ shyness and reluctance to explore their embodied experiences consciously, I was able to record their nonverbal gestures while participants talked about their experiences.

Although the participants were chosen for their expertise in ability to recognize and describe embodied states, this did not manifest as planned. However, once I realized that I could collect their nonverbal movements without having to ask about them directly, I concluded that participants do not have to be experts in embodied awareness in order to reveal aspects of their somatic experiences. Therefore this style of interviewing can be used with any participant who is willing to engage in it, and can be used for any field that inquires into human phenomenon.

Research Design

I first used the Body-focused Interview for my doctoral dissertation in 2013, which inquired into the spontaneous and unpredictable nature of intuitive phenomena in the clinical setting. I adapted this methodology from Gendlin’s process of Focusing (1981), briefly described above. The body-focused interview protocol is divided into three parts: orientation to the space, the main part of the interview, and ending activities. Please note that the interview
process below is described as if you are conducting an interview on the topic of my study. As you read further, I invite you to keep in mind your own phenomenon of interest and to consider the approaches and questions you might consider were you to conduct a similar interview process on that topic.

**Part 1: Orientation to the Space and the Topic**

Part 1 involves traditional introductory activities such as collecting data on the participant’s demographic background and introducing the interview topic. In addition the researcher also checks in with the participant’s sense of physical comfort and discusses his or her feelings about the video recorder. This is to help the participant to become more comfortably acclimated to the interview process.

As the participant sits, ask for attention to be brought to the physical body. Ask the participant to notice if there is any discomfort, and if so to find a more comfortable position in the chair. Invite the participant to look around the room to orient to the space. This might include asking if the distance between the researcher and participant is OK. If it is not, allow the participant to move or to ask the researcher to move. Bringing attention to the physical body primes the participant for later body-focused questions.

As part of the orientation to the space, explicitly point out the presence of the video camera, and encourage the participant to verbalize any discomforts. Paradoxically, verbalizing discomfort about the video (if any) will often ease any discomfort that the participant might feel regarding being video recorded. Physiologically, the process of orienting to the space and vocalizing any discomforts allows the parasympathetic branch of the nervous system to engage, producing a calm feeling.
Next, ask the participant to speak freely about his or her thoughts regarding the topic of discussion. For example, “So when you hear the word ‘intuition,’ what comes to mind?” Allow the participant to speak freely about whatever he or she wants to say about the topic. This is a warm-up to help the participant to feel comfortable expressing thoughts aloud in front of you and the camera. A participant may spontaneously begin to speak about a memory in relation to the topic, which is your cue to move to Part 2. If this does not happen, you can introduce Part 2 as described below.

Part 2: The Body-Focused Interview

The second part of the Body-focused Interview is the bulk of the interview and involves six steps. The first three are conducted as follows, with examples provided:

1) Ask the participant to recall an intuitive moment in clinical practice
2) Ask the participant to imagine the patient sitting in the room as if in a session together.
3) Invite the participant to speak in the present tense as if the event is happening in the current moment.

   Researcher: So, you see your patient sitting here...Tell me what happened, but see if you can speak about him as if it is all happening right now.

   Participant: Yes, this guy is a dance therapy patient, and he’s sitting here, and we’re doing a lot of talking in sessions too, as one does...um...and he, uh, comes in and tells me that he has...no anger.

4) At particular moments that feel significant to the study objectives, gently interrupt the participant by repeating a word that seemed to have some significance to the participant (you can notice when their movement becomes more animated, or their voice changes in some significant way), and then slow down the participant’s story by recreating the moment in the present time.

   Participant: ...he has...no anger.

   Researcher: No anger?
Participant: Right...he wasn’t in touch with his anger! And one day I just felt (emphatically...shakes head, “yes” two seconds) that he is at the point where he is really getting in touch with it (shaking head quickly “yes,” in rhythm with words).

Researcher: Can we go to that? That place, that - just that moment...even um—like imagining him here (pointing to a chair nearby) and uh, seeing him and just thinking back to that time when you were with him (palm opens quickly on the word, “with”) ...and he’s sitting there, and he says something. (slow gestures with both hands)

5) Encourage the participant to describe what is noticed in their body in that moment:

Researcher: …and something happens (bigger gesture of both hands moving from chest outward toward BB) where you just feel like... What is it you feel in your body at that moment when you noticed a change in him? Is there a sensation, emotion, or movement?

Participant: Ummm...(two second pause) what I felt also was...(two second pause, then a movement with her right hand in front of her chest, bringing it toward her quickly with a quick jerking motion, while mirroring that motion with her torso...pause, then same movement again.) What I am doing here...I’m doing...—a mild [torso] contraction? (laughs) and with the tensions (touches opposing arms with each hand) in the arms as well, you know? (laughs again). That hollowing out (pulls stomach area in, with right hand in front of her chest/stomach area, palm open) a little bit, without actually probably doing it, it’s all there, you know?

6) As the participant describes what is happening, the researcher points out, without judgment, certain gestures, postures or facial expressions that the participant displays, and expresses curiosity about them. This is done for the purpose of encouraging the participant to embody his or her own experience, and to possibly derive an insight about the experience that is new to the participant.

Participant: And um...as well as (lifts torso very slightly from bottom of spine) lifting, though...you know?

Researcher: You were lifting?

Participant: Yea, well (right hand draws a line from stomach area to neck) the energy lifts...I think it’s very much...(elongates spine in practically unperceivable action)

Researcher: Yea, I see you kind of sitting up and elongating your spine. What does that feel like? Is there an emotion that goes with that experience?
Participant: It's minimal. But if I—if I think back, it’s (tenses body into small contraction again) that kind of thing...that...cued me that...(two second pause) it doesn’t want to come out, but it’s there. Oh, wow! I was kind of feeling it for him!

Sometimes the participant will be able to elaborate on his or her embodied experience, and sometimes not. As shown above, you can still record nonverbal gestures that are seen, even if they are not verbally articulated by the participant. Therefore, even a participant who turns out to be shy about sharing embodied experiences can still offer valuable nonverbal information that you can record in the transcription.

Part 3: Grounding, Centering and “Cool Down”

Once you feel that the conversation is beginning to close (after you have collected as much of what you wanted as possible), begin to thank your participant for the time and effort given to your study. This is a gentle way to introduce the ending of your interview. Next, suggest (and demonstrate) a stretch, or breathing, and ask the participant to attend to a sense of weight in the chair, and the grounding of the feet. You might use imagery of “rooting” the feet into the ground as a way to bring your participant back to the present moment (as opposed to the remembered moment of intuition that was explored during the interview), and make eye contact with the participant. A handshake is also a grounding invitation.

Body-focused Interviewing: Practical Lessons Learned

1. Find a sense of comfort in your own body. This type of inquiry requires a particular type of attention and sensitivity from the researcher. Do not attempt this type of interview until you feel that you could be a participant in this type of interview process. It could help to learn a body/mind integrative practice, such as moving meditation, Focusing, Somatic Experiencing or
other somatic technique that requires simultaneous attention to mind and body. Please note that most yoga classes that are offered today do not teach the kind attention necessary for this type of interviewing. The beginning level of Focusing training that I completed as part of my preparation for conducting the body-focused interviews increased my skill for asking participants about their embodied experiences. The skills I learned also increased my ability to engage participants nonverbally when I saw that they felt uneasy. I would smile, exhale and find a sense of my own body. This appeared to relax participants; I noticed that they too would exhale, which has a physiological effect of relaxing the nervous system. The researcher’s capacity to feel relaxed in his or her own body increases the likelihood that the participant will also feel more at ease. Focusing workshops are offered worldwide and can be found on the Focusing website listed below.

2. **Practice your interview with test participants.** In order to anticipate potential problems I might encounter while conducting this type of interview I did a test interview with someone who was not as proficient in embodied awareness as I expected study participants to be. Practicing ahead of time will help you determine where your own challenges and strengths lie. It allows you to rehearse interrupting participants during the interview process and focusing on their nonverbal gestures.

3. **Warm up the session.** Invite your participant to get physically comfortable; allow a short time of small talk while observing how both you and the participant acclimate to the meeting. Explain the three parts of the interview at this time. For both yourself and for the participant, knowing how the interview will proceed will set a good sense of organization for you and give your participant a sense of timing and structure for the meeting. I learned from my work as a
therapist that by inviting the patient to make him- or herself more comfortable, the patient is able to feel more empowered and at ease as you proceed to ask questions.

4. **Warm up to the camera.** Similar to warming up to the interview session, it is helpful to address the fact that the interview will be video recorded, as well as address any discomfort that the participant might state regarding being video recorded. I was aware that some of my participants were not initially comfortable being video recorded, even though they agreed to it in the contract of informed consent. You can have fun introducing your participant to the camera and encourage outward expression of any apprehensions about video recording. Stating anxieties aloud can often relieve tension. At the end of each interview, I had asked how the participant felt being video recorded. Most said that they had completely forgotten about the camera.

5. **Reassure your participant as often as necessary that what they are sharing is OK!** I found that when participants struggled to find words, they would often apologize, which created a distraction from the interview process. This was most prevalent when I pointed out their gestures. Keep in mind that for many people anything involving attention to the body can bring up feelings of vulnerability. Participants may try to “be correct.” Reassure them as often as necessary that they are giving you great information. The most important thing is that they feel confident in what they are telling you, since confidence allows them to share more information and elicits more ease of gesture and authentic posturing.

**What does all this Mean Methodologically?**

This case was a descriptive examination of the Body-focused Interview that illuminated the importance for a researcher to become attentive to participants’ embodied experiences during phenomenological interviewing. Embodied descriptions provide more authentic examples of the
lived experience than traditional forms of phenomenological inquiry that often rely on verbal reports alone. Instructions for conducting a Body-focused Interview are listed and issues pertaining to the difficulties in conducting a Body-focused interview were discussed. By following my own intuition that “something was not quite right” when interviewing potential participants by phone, I learned how awareness of the body can provide a wealth of information for phenomenological inquiry that was not previously articulated in embodied studies.

While reviewing interview videos, I recorded participants’ verbalized movements and embodied feelings as well as unconscious gestures. During data analysis, I noticed that gestures seemed to either facilitate the participant’s story, as described in the examples, or provide further information about their unconscious knowledge regarding the experience that augmented what they were telling me verbally. For instance, when a participant said, “I don’t know how this happens,” his hand simultaneously moved toward and away from the right side of their head. This indicated that on some level of consciousness, the participant perhaps did know how it happened. As provided in the sample transcriptions, I included postures and gestures in parentheses in order to capture the movement qualities of the interviewee, and provide a more detailed description of the embodied experience. Since data analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, please see Tantia (2014, forthcoming) for further suggestions regarding systems for analysing nonverbal data.

The Body-focused Interview is in its beginning stages of development and, there are further uses for this method yet to be discovered. Researchers who use this type of interviewing may discover different ways in which the interview can be used beyond what was described in this chapter. Variations in findings would not constitute a detriment to the method, as it is a highly exploratory process. I also hope to be alerted to the use of this methodology as I shall
continue to develop its standards and potential use. Many more studies are needed to understand the many nuances of embodiment that could facilitate a deeper understanding of the lived human experience.

**Conclusion**

Embodiment, a phenomenon that includes the amalgam of thoughts, emotions and sensorial experience, can be described both verbally and nonverbally. The Body-focused Interview is a methodology designed for my PhD dissertation to support the discovery and description of embodied experiences that inform therapists’ intuitive moments as they work with patients. By preparing and inviting participants to engage in their own embodied awareness while discussing a topic or phenomenon, the researcher can glean more information about that participant’s experience than through words alone. Seeking out participants’ descriptions of phenomena rather than relying on the researcher’s interpretation brings the researcher closer to the participants’ actual lived experience. This method may be best used to explore complex social issues, as well as emotional experiences. With minimal prior preparation from the researcher, this interview method can be used across many social sciences and humanities disciplines.

**References**

Exercises

1. As a future embodied researcher, you might want to practice feeling what it is like to experience your own embodiment.

   - Sitting comfortably, bring attention to your breathing. Did you notice that it changes the moment that you gave it attention? Perhaps your inhale and exhale felt bigger. By bringing attention to your embodied experience, you increase the connection between body and mind. When you tap into the sensations in your body, what emotions are present? Stay with this for 3-5 minutes and notice if/how your sensations, emotions and thoughts shift your experience.

2. Take some time to think about the differences between metaphor and direct description. If you were to describe anger as “like a volcano” (a metaphor), what are the sensations in your body that align with anger feeling “like a volcano”? Try this with several other examples: sunset, tree, cougar, train, and baby. Make a list for each of these examples, to discover the differences between metaphor and embodied description.
3. Meet with a friend for tea, and as you converse take notice of this person’s gestures. What types of gestures do the hands make? Does the rhythm or size of the gestures change depending on the emotional content? Are the arms raised wider than the torso at times? When does your friend touch his or her own face, arm or body? See if you can make connections between gestures and the emotional intensity of your friend’s narrative.

**Further Reading**


**Links to Relevant Miscellaneous Web Resources**

- For more information on Focusing please visit [www.Focusing.org](http://www.Focusing.org)
- To learn more information on body/mind integrative practices in the United States, please visit: [www.USABP.org](http://www.USABP.org) (United States Association for Body Psychotherapy)
- To learn more information on body/mind integrative practices in the UK and other countries, please visit: [www.EABP.org](http://www.EABP.org) (European Association for Body Psychotherapy)