

Do you hear me?

*About therapeutic
listening*

creating space
for voices
to emerge and
to be heard

Dialogical Action Research
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Dialogical Action Research, written by Anne Hedvig Vedeler

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Abstract

This research is an inquiry into the role of listening in therapy.

The author was curious about the relation between a client's feeling of being heard, a listening therapist and emerging new voices. She invited this client to collaborate through what she called a Dialogical Action Research. The present work is the result of several long conversations, both therapy conversations and research conversations, between the client and the author, as well as the author's own reflections.

Listening is thought of in terms of a transforming process whereby the person you speak with is influenced through the way you listen. Attentive listening on the part of the therapist offers the client a unique opportunity to develop her inner voices and let them be expressed. This may create new self stories, and less rigid internal and external dialogues.

Theory and the contribution of others are in this project used as ideas to be placed in a 'voice-resource-bank' for later use during the research process. The Russian philosopher Michael Bakhtin's description of *the dialogue*, is a main frame of reference for the report, both in terms of the therapeutic relationship, methodology and method.

Chapter 1, Introduction

..the essence of life is not a feeling of being, of existence, but a feeling of participation in a flowing onward..
Bachelard, 1969.

Why is it so important for each one of us to express ourselves and get responses from other people? This is indeed a big and existential question. The Russian philosopher Michael Bakhtin (1984) gave an answer by asserting that "to be means to communicate...a person has no internal sovereign territory" (p. 287). But what does it mean to be heard, that someone listens in our communication? According to Bakhtin it is not too much to say that it can mean a matter of life and death; he refers to the lack of being heard, as "absolute death" (ibid., p. 287).

1.1 "Talking cure"

Psychotherapy has by and large always been considered a "talking cure". Those who have problems meet with one or more people anticipating that such talk will help. There are various accounts of how such a therapeutic conversation should be constructed and why it might be helpful. In my therapeutic work I have been interested in what Harlene Anderson (1997) calls a collaborative approach, where language is conceptualised as meaning creating and thereby also problem creating, and problem dissolving.

I don't believe anyone will argue that listening to other people is of no importance. Still, Riikonen & Smith (1997) have a point when they indicate that many schools of therapy have focused mainly on interventions and questions. Listening has been taken for granted and there has been relatively less focus on differentiating between different styles and ways of listening.

In the present study I want to examine the relationship between talking, being listened to and the feeling of being heard, and how we can look at this in terms of 'cure'. My inquiry should not be seen as an argument *for or against the importance of listening compared with*

questioning. However, my concern is to create a space for a voice that traditionally has not been given much attention in what is written about psychotherapy.

1.2. Listening

I believe we all, at some moment in our life have expressed with satisfaction, "it feels good to talk to him or her, he/she is such a good listener". Still, what strikes me is how often I don't feel heard, that the one I speak to either doesn't listen or doesn't seem interested in what I have to say or gives quick answers, asks questions, starts explaining or telling stories. Likewise I know that I time and again frustrate others by not listening long or well enough.

Some years ago I sat down with my supervisor to talk about a paper I was about to write. She asked me what I had in mind and I began loosely and unsystematically to say something about all the different ideas I had. While having this outer talk with my supervisor I had an inner talk with myself. This was about how stupid and unsure she must think I was. By and by this inner conversation dominated to the extent that it blocked the outer conversation. I felt plain stupid. "What I'm now saying is completely meaningless", I said and went on, "it's chaos in my head, I don't know myself what I'm thinking". I still remember my supervisor's answer, "This is your time, use it as you please, talk as you like". I felt that a space was created in which I by trial and error could search for words that made it clearer what I meant to express.

This and similar experiences where I have been given room to express myself made me curious how these rooms operate. At the same time I became more and more concerned about what happened in therapeutic conversations. What kind of context did I as a therapist help to create? What is the potential inherent in contexts where the clients have ample time to talk?

For some time I worked in a family treatment unit in Norway. I became particularly interested in the 'developmentally supportive dialogue' (Hafstad & Øvreiede 1998, Bråten 1993) describing how parents participate in a dialogue with their child, supporting and enhancing its development. For me it became meaningful to use this knowledge to understand more about the dialogue between adults. In particular I found Hafstad & Øvreiede's (1998) description of empathy intriguing. "The process of empathy consists of working toward a better dialogue where one goes beyond one's own interests and with curiosity and emotion tunes in to the state of the other" (p. 31). This inspired me to try to meet 'the other' with curiosity and sensitivity.

I travelled from my country, Norway, to work for a master's degree in systemic therapy at KCC International. At the clinic in London where I had my pair work I met a female client, Meercat¹, who used most of the time we had together talking without interruptions. As therapist I found myself listening, still, I didn't feel I was a passive participant or that the conversations became monotonous by extensive 'monologues' from the client. My reflections during the therapeutic process became the starting point for my interest in trying to examine what happened between us in our dialogues.

1.3. Research design

Finding a methodology and a method to fit this project was a process. To me *the dialogue* became both a phenomenon I wanted to study and at the same time a tool, a method, for such a study. Therefore *the dialogue* in the present work is both an object of study, a conceptual framework for the methodology and a model for my concrete research design in gathering and understanding my data.

I didn't want to put myself outside and study others' relationships but to examine 'from within' a relationship of which I was a part. Using as a point of departure the idea that knowledge is created between people in dialogue (Bakhtin 1981, Shotter 1993) I consider myself an inquirer who is, in the words of Chen & Pearce (1995) 'implicated in a creative process that simultaneously expresses and constructs events and experiences' (p. 146). The aim of this research is to create more knowledge about what happens in my practice and to see how the creation of this knowledge feeds back on my practice.

I consider the research as a process in which I have tried to be attentive to Meercat's voices, my voices and the input and reflections of others. What was in the beginning meant as a fairly pre planned, structured design developed, changed and emerged during the process resulting in this dissertation.

The therapy, on which this research is based, lasted for 18 months and included 22 sessions. The research process went on for 9 months and the present report is a description of this process. The challenge has been to structure the report to comply with the requirements of

¹ Meercat is the name the client chose to make herself anonymous. She chose that name because she once participated in a workshop, and she was given that name by the members of her group. They thought she showed the same curiosity and alertness as the little animal. All other names she mentions are made anonymous as well.

academia and at the same time be loyal to the process of helter-skelter that has been the nature of this reflection and action process. This has not been anything like a linear process where *a* leads to *b* that leads to *c* etc. A dialogical process unfolds itself along quite different paths, more like emerging knowledge without any definite origin or end.

I did not want to use theory as *one* model of explanation, but rather use theory as ideas and utterances to be placed in a ‘voice-resource-bank’² later to be used in my reflections during the research process. Still, it was in Bakhtin’s description of the dialogue that I found the frame of reference for the report, both in terms of the therapeutic relationship, methodology and method. I shall expand on some ideas of what I have called the Dialogical Approach to research, present some ideas from the tradition of Action Research and finally fit this together in what I have called *Dialogical Action Research*. The process is described chronologically, and I share with the reader the client’s and my own reflections during the period of inquiry. This part of the report will be the one that deviates most from traditional methods of information gathering and analysis. In the present form of inquiry theses and syntheses will evolve through the process and reflexively influence each other. My aim is to meet the criteria for doing constructionist research³ by participating in a transparent and dialogical process, and through giving an accurate an account as possible of that process.

The dialogues I have participated in, while conducting this research have expanded my understanding of my role as a therapist by giving me an opportunity to reflect on my practice. I would be pleased if my readers - that is anyone with an interest in listening as part of the interaction between people, colleagues, tutors and examine board - said something like: *This makes sense, I haven’t thought about that in this way before, or this provokes my curiosity*. I would also appreciate if the readers felt invited into an open-ended dialogue concerning the issues addressed.

² As described on p. 17.

³ As described in Chapter 5, Methodology and Chapter 6, Dialogue as Method.

Chapter 2, My Curiosity

...just as in the moment-by-moment movements within a dance, there is a sense of rightness and wrongness of fit, a sense of honouring or failing to respect the 'invitations' others offer us in their actions. Without a responsibility to the relationship, dancing is impossible.

Katz and Shotter, 1999

My interest in listening increased when I met Meercat⁴, a 55-year-old woman. She was referred to therapy because she was very unhappy with her life and her relationship with her family. She talked and I listened, session after session. I didn't say much, not only because I wanted to listen carefully, but also because my skills in the English language still prohibited me from 'taking up space' by talking. From lack of a '*tool for talking*' I became eager to use '*the tool of listening*'.

As best I could I tried to tune in on Meercat's emotional state, showing her my interest by listening to what she said and trying to understand what she wanted me to hear. I concentrated on her facial expression, body movement and breathing, as well as her words.

2.1. Sessions

I gave much thought to what happened in our sessions, by talking with Meercat, with my colleagues in the team and by reading the transcripts of our sessions. I was struck by how often Meercat expressed satisfaction with being heard. These are extracts from 3 sessions:

⁴ See Appendix p. 74 for genogram.

Session 6

Meercat:

..it's a weight, it's virtually like being paralysed with so many things, but until I get it off, out, I feel so misunderstood. I can't seem to focus on just one thing, when there are so many....Bill has downgraded me, it's totally untrue, really.

*Anna*⁵:

I wonder Meercat, when you tell me this story, is this the only place you can talk about it?

Meercat:

There is no one else.

Session 7

Meercat:

Yeah. You know I'm thinking of what they [*the reflecting team (my remark)*] say, about is it helpful, and...I just feel that ... If you can bear with me, you know I feel there is so much weight there, Anna.

Anna:

Do you feel that when you talk you lift weight off your shoulders?

Meercat:

Yeah, I know I have been heard. I know there is more, but I.. hm Yeah.

Anna:

And you know that is absolutely OK. We just want to be sure it

Meercat:

Helpful, yeah...I think it is about me feeling a better person, you know. I don't feel like a good person, and I need to.

Session 8

Meercat:

⁵ Anna is me, the therapist.

If you can only bear with me, and listen.it's so good to feel heard.

Meercat said she felt relieved and it was good to feel she was being heard. My impression was that through the 12 first sessions there was a movement; Meercat's stories became richer, she didn't repeat herself as much as before and there were some emerging new voices to be heard. I became curious about what happened between us. Was there a relationship between my listening stance and her feeling of being heard? If it was, what was the 'quality' of my listening? Is there any relationship between the feeling of being heard and emerging new voices? I thought it could be useful to explore these questions, to find out more about our interaction, what is useful, not so useful, and how can we make use of this knowledge.

2.2. Differences

Being a Norwegian, it was a challenge, with my background and culture, to do therapy in Northeast London, in a language that was not my mother tongue. During my first year as student therapist I often thought that there is more than the North Sea between a Norwegian and an English person. The emphasis on words, eloquence and form were alien to me. I was not used to what I experienced as verbosity, a high speed of taking turns, and wondered if there was any time for thinking and for reflection. Smilingly I speculated that it was perhaps no wonder that it was the sturdy but humble Norwegian, Tom Andersen, who had 'invented' the reflecting processes⁶. Has this some relation to the culture of my country? During that time I had much pleasure in reading the book of Jeremy Paxman (1999) 'The English, Portrait of a People'. I felt I understood more about the differences between our two people. In this book Norwegians are referred to as simple and rather naïve people, and I can recognize that. By and large Norwegians don't talk as much as the English, and I thought that my lack of verbal input in therapy sessions perhaps not only was due to 'not knowing the English language'. May be there are some cultural differences between Norwegian and English therapists? May be I didn't have so much to say?

I reflected on how my listening stance might influence Meercat's experience of our relationship, her opportunity to find her voice and her ability to voice her expectations. Did it create a helpful space or could my lack of verbal response in fact make her feel unsafe as well?

⁶ About reflecting processes, p. 26.

We are both middle aged white women, with adult, as well as teenage children. But we are unique human beings, with different backgrounds and have lived very different lives. These differences, also concerning nationality and education will of course have an influence on our relationship. I recognise that I cannot 'give' voice to Meercaat. Whether she feels she has the opportunity to express her expectations, assumptions and concerns is determined by what space we are able to create.

Chapter 3, Research Questions

In the beginning
is the relationship.

Martin Buber

A relation is never static,
but always in the process
of being made and unmade.

Bakhtin

Based on my curiosity I formulated the following questions:

- 1. What is the relationship between Meercat's feeling of being heard and the therapist taking a listening stance?**
- 2. What is "the quality" of the listening stance?**
- 3. What is the relationship between Meercat's feeling of being heard and her emerging voices?**
- 4. What may be a proper methodology and method of investigating the above questions?**

Chapter 4, Literature

There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogical context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future).

Even past meanings, that is, can never be stable, finalized, ended once and for all – They will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent , development of the dialogue.

Bakhtin, 1984

Having an interest in the relationship between listening on the part of the therapist and the client's feeling of being heard and a possible emergence of new 'voices', I will focus on the dialogue between client and therapist. I thought of the literature in terms of establishing a *voice-resource-bank*, by which I mean a use of the theory presented here as a background for my reflections during the research process, described in Chapter 7, Action Process.

4.1. Voice-resource-bank

Through the review of the literature I will shed light on how listening has been punctuated through the history of psychotherapy. After that I shall emphasize a kind of approach that I have called dialogical. Bakhtin's (1981, 1984, 1986) ideas about how *we live in and understand the world through the dialogue* have been of major importance, informing and inspiring me in my curious search for more understanding of the role of listening in relationships among people. In addition I have strongly appreciated the ideas of Mead (1934), Wittgenstein (1953), Vygotsky (1985), Voloshinov (1994), Billig (1996, 1999) and Shotter (1993, 1999, 2004, 2004a). I have also been inspired by the writings of experienced therapists like Anderson & Goolishian (1988, 1992), Andersen (1992, 1994, 1996), Seikkula & Olson (2003) Roth (1999) and Weingarten (1992, 1998).

By looking into the many facets of the dialogue I hope to show how such knowledge can create a thicker understanding of what happens between people, on many levels, in our communication, and the role of listening in this context. This is about how meaning is created, in our thoughts, between individuals and in our social world in a wider sense.

4.2. History

Historically listening has had a firm status in what people has experienced as healing.

Examples are religious prayer where the one who prays hopes to be heard directly by a god, or the catholic tradition of confession with an anonymous listener later to offer forgiveness or good advice.

In common sense, listening is often considered a passive position in a conversation. One person speaks and the other keeps quiet. That is also the case in the world of therapy. Jackson (1992) has described the listening healer in the history of psychological practice. The therapist traditionally listens quietly and passively to the client who is the one who does the talking. The listener gathers information from the speaker and reaches an understanding from this. The active part of this process takes place in the head of the listener and the aim is primarily to gather clinical information and understanding.

4.2.1. Psychoanalysis

The psychoanalytic therapist listens while the client is encouraged to talk 'in free flow', less out of regard for the value or interest of the story itself than the experience it highlights. The therapist will "have to listen attentively for the subtle clues which would indicate where the crucial hidden element was to be found" (Billig, 1999, s. 18). Talk is the medium for the cure. The therapist's interest is about "the underlying structure, part science, part mythology, that purport to explain the experience, both the highlighted and those forgotten" (Parry, 1992, p. 37).

4.2.2. Client-Centred Therapy

Carl Rogers developed the Client-Centered therapy (1951, p. 158) according to which the central hypothesis is that the relationship between client and therapist can move the former. This relationship is based on the therapist's letting the client taking the lead, allowing her to talk about whatever she wants.

Rogers (1951) quotes a client who said, "I listened to myself while talking. And in doing so I would say that I solved my own problems" (p. 40). Rogers understood this as caused by the attitude of the therapist and his responses that made it easier for the client to "listen to myself". The client moves from experiencing himself as an unworthy, unacceptable and unloveable person to the realization that he is accepted, respected, and loved, in this limited relationship with the therapist. The word 'loved' is used here to mean to be deeply understood and deeply accepted.

4.2.3. The Milan Model

Systemic therapy has grown out of, and sometimes been in opposition to psychoanalytic thinking. In contrast to the latter's interest in investigating the inner life of the client, systemic therapists were mainly concerned with communication between people. (Seikkula & Olson, 2003)

The original Milan model positioned the clients as objects for therapeutic action. The therapist, being the expert, after interviewing the clients, made a well-planned intervention (Selvini-Palazzoli et al., 1978). From the beginning of the eighties the Milan team was inspired by the work of von Forster, Varela and Maturana. These authors introduced concepts like second order cybernetics (Seikkula & Olson, 2003). They claimed that we cannot speak of separate and observable systems without taking the role of the observer into consideration. Hence any contact with a family will be coloured by the therapist's ideas about the family. In the Milan team's article on hypothesizing-circularity-neutrality (Selvini-Palazzoli et al., 1980) the very interview was highlighted as important for its own sake. This contributed to a development within the systemic field where the *importance of conversation* was considered more as a method in itself. But still the questions put to the clients are a matter of great weight, with the aim to let them reflect on their own situation.

4.3. Meaning as socially constructed

The idea of social constructionism emphasizing how meaning is socially constructed in language between people (Shotter 1993) had in the nineties a major influence on systemic therapy. Social constructionism has led to therapies that focus on the role of language both in the generation, resolution and dissolution of personal problems (Guilfoyle, 2003).

Defining the aim of therapy as to investigate and co construct meaning through dialogue Anderson and Goolishian let themselves be influenced by these ideas (1988, 1992). This is what Anderson later called "a postmodern collaborative approach to therapy" (1997). As I understand it this approach is related to Andersen's work with the reflecting team (1994) and Seikkula's 'open dialogue' approach (2003).

Shotter (1999, 2003, 2004a,b), partly in collaboration with Katz (Katz & Shotter, 1998, 1999), has in various articles in recent years developed ideas about what life is like for us from within the 'interactive moment'; what it means for people to act dialogically and to react in a

spontaneous-expressive- responsive and bodily way to the activities of another's being, with their utterances, their bodily expressions, their words and their works.

All these authors have in common a focus on the dialogical process in therapy⁷. They consider the dialogue as an invitation to the participants to influence and be influenced by the interaction between the partners in conversation.

4.4. The Dialogue

Language and communication is primarily constitutive of social reality, Bakhtin claimed (1981, 1986); it is not a device for 'picturing' or mirroring an already existing language-independent reality (Shotter, 1993). Instead language is seen as creating our world, and it is done in the dialogue. We think, talk and act dialogically (Bakhtin, 1981), new meaning originates on the boundary between one's own and someone else's consciousness, when our voices *reach out* and *call* others into relation with us.

According to Bakhtin (in Holquist 1990) the dialogue is not solely a way of understanding communication between two people; it is also an epistemological approach to how knowledge is created in relationship and context.

Bakhtin claimed that meaning cannot change physical and material phenomena; meaning is not a material force. It does not need to be because it has the power to change 'the total contextual meaning of an event and reality without changing its actual (existential) composition of one iota' (quoted in Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 476). Everything remains as before, but we understand it in quite another way.

In the next section I shall discuss some concepts that may be helpful to understand why I have chosen the dialogue as the central point of reference in my investigation of the relationship between listening and being heard and of the phenomenon of the emergence of new voices in therapy. The concepts addressed are:

Open-ended dialogues, self, polyphony, utterance, addressivity, receptivity, double voice, response, intonation, 'touching' and 'moving', understanding, unfinalizability,

⁷ Other schools of therapy i.e. CMM (Cronen&Lang, 1994, Cronen, 1995), Narrative (White, 1995) and Solution Focused (de Shazer, 1985) would also come under the description of therapies that focus on how meaning is created in language and conversations.

superaddressee, context, inner and outer dialogues, conscious and unconscious, monolog versus dialogue.

4.4.1. The relationship between language and the experience of self

Bakhtin's (1984) dialogism implies a consistent interest in 'the other' and in what happens between people in communication. He claimed that life itself is dialogic; to live is to participate in an *open-ended dialogue*. To be is to communicate. The human being has not an inner sovereign territory; it is always on the border, 'looking inside himself, he looks into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another' (ibid., p. 287).

What really matters in the development of the *self*, Vygotsky (1986) says is to have command of "tools and signs that mediate them; and language is the tool". Individuality is always created in a social process. When telling the stories of our lives, Bakhtin says (Morson & Emerson, 1990), we do not mediate direct experience or memory but we tell stories through the imagined other's value and intonations. Each story is composed of several independent voices in constant dialogue with each other; *the self* is in this way continually authored and consists of many voices, the self is *polyphonic*.

The self emerges Anderson (1997) claims, through different stories dependent on the social context and the conversations that take place within these contexts. Roy Schafer (quoted in Anderson 1997) consider the self as a 'a manifestation of human action, the action of speaking about one self...the process of the telling of the story holds the opportunity for change' (p. 223).

4.4.2. Addressivity, receptivity, utterance and double voice

In dialogical conversations the language is structured between the speaker and the listener, Bakhtin (1981) explains. The *utterance* is the decisive element in verbal communication; it has both an *addressivity* and *receptivity*. And it has a *double voice*; everything said or listened to is done with a view toward the other. We can never speak out of a vacuum or into one. In addressing someone we will be conscious of whom we are addressing and how he or she might *respond*. This will affect the way you speak, which details to choose and which values you appeal to. Voloshinov (1973) describes the word as a product of the mutual relationship between the speaker and the listener, a bridge between you and the other.

Any utterance is also a statement of value, and an action. The purpose of words is not only to represent but also to give form, to create. Words are gestures, as Katz & Shotter (1998) writes. They view people's words in their speaking as deeds, as actions and a crucial use of words is to 'move' or 'strike' others. *Intonation* always lies on the border of the verbal and the nonverbal, the said and the unsaid, Voloshinov (1987) explains, "...it is in intonation above all that the speaker comes into contact with listener or listeners - intonation is social par excellence. It is especially sensitive to all the vibrations in the social atmosphere surrounding the speaker" (p. 102).

By speaking out you arouse, not only a response in the person you speak to Mead says (1934), but you also arouse the same tendency in yourself. Individuals respond to their own stimuli in the same way as other people respond. So when I'm saying something, I'm saying it to myself as well. Andersen (1996) describes talking as a bodily activity, as the whole body is formed or re-formed in the moment of an utterance. Thus the ability to move someone by the use of language and intonation, is not only an ability to move someone else, it is also the ability to move oneself.

This ability to use language, through choosing words and intonation, to touch another being and be moved, are all parts of our more or less conscious ways of influencing each other. Shotter (2003) explains how people in their meeting with each other spontaneously both touch, and are touched by each other, and in these moments of *touching or moving*, differences emerge. As living embodied beings, we cannot, he says, not be responsive to the expression of others. So it is in these moments of intertwining living interaction that new possibilities of relation are created and new *shapes* of experience can emerge.

4.4.3. To understand

To understand is much more than to recognise or decode a sentence. The very process of perceiving or *understanding* others' utterances takes place when these utterances come in contact with the listener's inner voices. Each time a listener tries to understand, she has to according to Bakhtin (1981) understand why it is said and relate to the interests of the utterance and assumptions. She has to imagine how the utterance 'responds to future utterances' (Ibid. p. 282) and what kind of response it invites, evaluate it and try to imagine how a third person would understand it. And above all, the listener has to undergo a complex process to prepare a *response* to the utterance. Understanding is never reached but through a response, these two are

dialectically melted together and presuppose each other. According to Bakhtin the speaker on her part seeks for an active understanding. She orients herself into the world of the listener, introducing new elements while she makes an effort to make the listener read her words. The speaker “breaks through the alien conceptual horizon of the listener, constructs his own utterance on alien territory, against his, the listener’s, apperceptive background” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 282). This process whereby the utterance is created between the speaker and the listener decides the choice of words, content and way of expression.

The proper way to understand the other is not “psychologically” but dialogically, Bakhtin writes (1984), that is the ability to sense the inner dialogues of the others in all their *unfinalizability* and then participate in that dialogue while respecting its openness. To understand an utterance is to understand it in a particular context, to understand its novelty and not recognize its identity.

4.4.4. Superaddressee

The utterance is dependent on the other person’s responsive understanding. But in addition to this other person each utterance is also constituted by another kind of listener, a more distant, but supreme one, Bakhtin claims (1986). Each dialogue takes place against the background of the responsive understanding of an invisibly present third party who stands above all the participants in the dialogue. The author of the utterance seeks this *superaddressee’s just responsive understanding*. This is, according to Bakhtin, part of the nature of words; what is said wants to be *heard*. It will always seek “*responsive understanding*, and does *not stop at immediate understanding*, but presses on further and further, indefinitely” (p. 127).

4.4.5. Context

Meaning or knowledge are produced and understood only in context, and the single utterance cannot be seen independent of what is uttered earlier. Any utterance is part of a chain of utterances and is marked by this, and will in its turn mark the utterances to come. No speaker is after all the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe, Bakhtin reminds us (1981).

4.4.6. Thoughts and dialogues

Dialogue is not only something that takes place between people like in an outer, observable conversation. Thinking can be understood as inner dialogues (Bakhtin, 1981), inner speech

resembles the alternating lines of a dialogue (Volosinov, 1973). According to Wittgenstein thinking is not a hidden, unobservable and quiet process, taking place in peoples' heads (in Billig, 1999). This is not a new idea of our time. In Plato's dialogue, *The Sophist*, he asserted that 'thought and language are the same; only the former, which is the silent conversation of the soul with itself, has been given the special name of thought' (in Billig 1999, p. 46).

Even when you are thinking by yourself, the way you speak to yourself is affected and determined by the ones you imagine you speak to, Bakhtin explains (1981, 1984). Billig (1996) expands on this by claiming that thinking is a kind of inner argumentation modelled after the outer dialogue. In this way our 'inner attitudes' become rhetorical attitudes where we justify and criticize ourselves and others in a continuous inner rhetoric activity.

4.4.7. From inner to outer conversations

According to Vygotsky (1986) there are still differences *between inner and outer dialogues*. In our inner dialogues we take many things for granted. Many abbreviations and condensations take place in inner conversations. For example it is not necessary to explain the context in the same way as in an outer dialogue, we take it for granted that we understand ourselves. The sense of different words flow into one another and literally 'influence' one another, so that earlier ones are contained in, and modify the later ones. "One word stands for a number of thoughts and feelings, and sometimes substitutes for a long and profound discourse", (Vygotsky 1976, p. 248). A single word is so saturated with sense that to unfold it into outer speech, one would need a multitude of words.

When thoughts, inner dialogues, are to be externalised into outer utterances we have to make them sensible to others and we have to make many choices. Hence the outer conversation will almost never be the same as we imagined it would turn out in our inner conversation. This transformation between thought and word is, according to Vygotsky, not a thing but a process. It is a continuous movement back and forth, from thought to word and from word to thought. In the course of this process changes will occur both in thought and word, 'thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them' (Vygotsky, 1976, p. 218).

Billig (1999) points out that it would be wrong to assume that every utterance is an outer sign of thought processes. Sometimes the course of a conversation runs so fast that it is impossible to prepare for what to say next. 'Often we hear ourselves saying something in response, only

discovering what our thoughts are as we speak. The thinking is not hidden, but is happening out there in the conversation (s.48).

4.4.8. The conscious and the unconscious

According to Bakhtin and Voloshinov, summed up in Morson & Emerson (1990), the notions of the *conscious* and *the unconscious* hinge on a complex dialogue between multitudes of different voices, a polyphony of voices in our inner dialogues. "At any present moment of the dialogue there are great masses of forgotten meanings, but these will be recalled again at a given moment in the dialogue's later course when it will be given new life. For nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will someday have its homecoming festival" (Bakhtin quoted in Holquist, 1990, p. 39).

There is no such thing as a secret mental life Billig claims (1999), everything can be heard if one only listens well enough. The speakers have no secrets hidden for themselves, but our rhetorical skills make it possible to open up new themes both in social debates and in private talks he explains. We can say more than just a 'yes' or express agreement, we can move forward dialogically. Billig asserts that the ability of humans to close down matters discursively makes it possible to change conversations, pushing them away from embarrassing or troubling topics. This does not necessarily mean that speakers deliberately stop themselves from saying something particular. It is simpler than that. A speaker can say only one thing at a time. *The said, having been uttered, creates the not said.* That which opens up and that which closes occur in a simultaneous process, hence dialogical creativity and avoidance are not opposites but closely linked in practice. Language is both expressive and repressive Billig argues. Any dialogue, both in its content and form, presupposes certain rules of politeness. Both the speaker and the 'listener' can in this way suppress, even repress, utterances. The term repression will in this way of thinking mean that the "unspeakable" turns into the "unmentionable" and even the "unthinkable".

4.4.9. Monologue versus dialogue

Bakhtin (1984) explains the monologue as an approach by which one person remains an object of the other; no response is anticipated that can change anything. It is in the highest sense a 'denial of the equal rights of consciousnesses vis-à-vis truth (p. 285). Bakhtin discusses the term monologue to understand totalitarian approaches; by denying and closing down the dialogue, one will be the object of the other and monologue will appear.

4.5. Therapists' voices

Dialogical therapy works precisely through the *performance* of dialogue. It invites clients and therapists to influence and to be influenced, to shape and be shaped by the interaction, and be mutually involved in meaning construction. The client's voices are encouraged to emerge through different ways of talking.

4.5.1. 'Not knowing position'

Anderson & Goolishian (1992) refer to *not knowing* as a position – an attitude and a belief, pointing to the fact that the therapist keeps no privileged information. The therapist can never understand a person fully, she must always be in a state of being informed by the other, and always needs to learn more about what has been said or may not have been said.

4.5.2. 'Tolerance of uncertainty'

Anderson (1997) emphasizes the importance of not understanding too fast. The selective listening and response of the therapist may hinder the dialogue leading to early closure and consequently weakening the options for the emergence of new understanding. By emphasizing '*tolerance of uncertainty*' (Seikkula & Olson, 2003), a safe space may be created for the *not yet said*, so that *what has been inexpressible can be given voice*.

4.5.3. Reflecting processes

What Andersen (1992, 1994, 1996) calls *reflecting processes* can be described as a shift between inner and outer conversations. The participants are given the opportunity to shift between different positions. For example: They may speak and be listened to, speak and listen to themselves, or listen to others and speak to themselves. By using these different positions in a deliberate well planned arrangement (i.e. a reflecting team format) it is possible to close down the speed and give space to more conversations and a dialogue that opens up.

4.5.4. Safety

Roth (1999) reminds us that the context is important if one is to feel safe enough to speak and listen, and she asks; "What kinds of actions and contexts encourage me to speak with an open heart? To listen with an open heart? What kinds of context feel safe enough to enable me to speak so openly and listen so openly to others that I may be changed by the contact, influenced by the conversation?" (p. 95).

4.5.5. Therapists' abilities

Weingarten (1992) points out that perhaps the therapist first and foremost has to learn the 'ability not to understand'. She has in later writings (1998) been intrigued by the many voices and stories that can exist within each person; the therapist's task is to create the conditions for all these voices and all these stories to be heard.

Chapter 5, Methodology

We do not address inquiries to nature and she does not answer us.

We put questions to ourselves and we organize observation and experiment in such a way as to obtain an answer.

Bakhtin in Gergen, 1999

The production of science is not an operation (or indeed an autopsy); it is a relationship.

Gorelick, 1991

In my search for a way of studying the phenomenon of listening in the clinical dialogue I wanted to find a research model that could fit such an inquiry. I thought it must be possible to think of the dialogue as a methodology, knowledge is co-created in a context and should be described in terms of this context. I wanted to give privilege to the voices arguing that knowledge is constructed in relationships and should be understood in context.

5.1. Knowledge

As emphasized in the previous chapter the dialogue, as described by Bakhtin (Morson & Emerson, 1990), may also be understood as an epistemological approach to the creation of knowledge. Choosing the perspective that knowledge is created in relationship, in a continuous movement between voices in action, any dialogue may be defined as a research process. Such a process can take place on many levels being more or less spontaneous. Additional knowledge is created when we through conversations reflect on what we experience and do together (reflection and action). When this takes place over time more knowledge will emerge.

Hereafter I shall elaborate some ideas concerning different dialogical approaches to research. I shall also present some ideas from the tradition of Action Research. These two approaches argue that valid knowledge depends on collaboration and pave the way to considerations about ethics, validity and quality in research. I will try to weave together these two sets of concepts, dialogue and action research, to what I have called Dialogical Action Research. The ideas in this chapter will from time to time overlap, touch and supplement what I have written in chapter 4, Literature.

5.2. Dialogical Approach to Research

As described earlier social constructionism argues that language does not *represent, but creates* our understanding of the world. There is no reality 'behind appearance', Shotter says (1993). Instead of studying the inner dynamics of the individual psyche, he encourages us to study the 'flow of continuous communicative activity between human beings' (p. 179).

5.2.1. Knowledge created within relationships

A third kind of knowledge exists, between knowing *that* and knowing *how*. This kind of knowledge we gain from *within* a social situation by considering the others in the situation (Shotter 1993). This knowledge, knowing of the third kind, is not a thing to be discovered, it is created in the process of living, in the voices of ordinary people in conversation.

Wittgenstein asserts that when we try to understand each other we don't need to learn anything new, but understand something "that is already in plain view, something that we need to remind ourselves of" (1953, no. 89). He suggests replacing guesses and explanations with "the quiet weighting of linguistic facts" (1981, no. 447). Try not to think of, Wittgenstein says, "understanding as a 'mental process' at all. - For *that* is the expression which confuses you. But ask yourself: in what sort of case, in what kind of circumstances, do we say, "Now I know how to go on", (1953, no. 154).

The truth is not found, as Bakhtin (1984) puts it, inside the head of an individual, but "is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogical interaction" (p. 110).

Shotter (1999), following Bakhtin, asserts that in almost all of our daily activities we are interlinked with others and with 'othernesses' in our surroundings in a whole web of living, spontaneous responsive relationships. Meaning is created and makes sense only in those situations in "which living human beings make some *use* of them in relating themselves to other human beings" (Shotter & Katz, 1998, p. 82). Their point is that of seeing relationships, first in one way, then in another. This is what Shotter & Katz call 'responsive-relational understanding'. These conversational partners must connect, collaborate, and create understanding through shared inquiry, one that is shaped and reshaped while struggling to understand the issues at hand. The dialogical partners are according to Goolishian and Anderson (1987) transformed through this process, and the outcomes in this evolving process

are both unpredictable and uncertain. As Shotter (2003) says, the dialogical way is open towards evolving new understanding, it is fluid and open to transformation, moment by moment in our relationships with each other.

5.2.2. Monological and dialogical way of understanding

Shotter (2004b) contrasts two ways of understanding and describing a phenomenon; involved, prospective, dialogical or use an objective, retrospective and monological style.

If we understand our studies as objective or realistic, we will see them as closed and finalized, and that is what Shotter calls a monologic style. A monological analysis will according to Bakhtin's (1981) notion of 'authoritative discourse', be blind and deaf to the other's response and will close down further emerging voices. A truth seeking and explanatory analysis (Shotter, 2004b) will conduct itself towards the object of interest as a static object, which can be explained to another human being. This object remains wholly and merely an object of consciousness, and not another consciousness.

Bakhtin (Morson & Emerson, 1990) sometimes used the term 'monologism' to explain what he called an error, the assumption that everything has a meaning relating to the seamless whole, a meaning one could discover if one only had the code. This kind of thinking is totalitarian, he argued, in its assumption that it can, in principal, explain the totality of things. It is not a question of either-or, he explained, but of polyphony. The dialogical approach is open for change in response to experience, does not aim at moving anyone in any exact direction and invites other voices into an open-ended co-creating process.

5.3. Action Research

Action Research is a methodology that, according to Reason & Bradbury (2001), refers to a process in which people act on a difficult situation, think about what they are doing, decide how to improve it, based on feedback, try it out, reflect on their 'action' and keep on doing what they now feel is a better practice. In this process, however, they must continually update their thinking and modify their practice taking the present situation into account. An integration of action and reflection as well as an increased collaboration between all involved in the research project has been accentuated lately. In this way knowledge will develop in the process and be directly relevant to the people involved. This leads according to Reason & Bradbury

(ibid) to 'better' research because it's grounded on the perspectives and interests of the ones involved, not filtered through outsiders, their preconceptions and interests.

Reason & Bradbury (2001) argue "when we join knower with known in participative relationship; as we move away from operational measurement into a science of experiential qualities, we undercut the foundations of the empirical-positivist worldview that has been the foundation of Western inquiry since the Enlightenment. In doing this, we are part of the current shift from a 'modern' to a 'post modern' world'" (s.4). This shift implies seeing the world as shaped by language, and through collaborative investigation 'a world view' is co created. Since action research is concerned with the development of democratic forms of knowledge it is concerned with the ways in which language is used in the service of those who hold power to define reality.

5.3.2. Unpredictability and participation

McNiff (1996, 2003) maintains that people generate their own knowledge through how they live and learn in life. Knowledge is never static or complete but constantly changing as new understanding emerges. She pursues the idea of knowledge about reality as an evolutionary process of surprises and unpredictability where safety and unsafety are complementary, not contradictory.

A participatory perspective, McNiff continues, challenges us to make our position clear, to reflect and to be explicit as to how knowledge is created, to see our inquiry as a process of 'coming to know'. We should focus on how scientists have to make a choice in the course of their work, choices that will influence the quality and validity of their decisions. This shift between action and reflection, where we are asked to look at experiences and our practice from many angles, will help us to develop more ideas and to try out new ways of acting. If both single aspects and combinations are reviewed continually action and reflection will reflexively refine each other.

5.3.4. Scientific "value"

Greenwood, (in Shotter, 2004b) in his discussion of different conceptions of scientific research claims that action research is "far more 'scientific' in the sense of knowledge tested and refined in action. It mobilizes relevant knowledge from people in a position to know their condition far better than conventional research can with its extractive approach".

5.4. Dialogical Action Research

Gustavsen (in Shotter, 2004b) links action research to dialogically oriented projects, where the process is ongoing, interactive, minimally structured and done step-by-step.

5.4.1. Research as practice

The dialogical approach and action research unite in the view that objective knowledge is impossible. They have in common that they see the participants in the research process as subjects in action. To *know* is not only an academic activity but also a continuous process in our daily life when we are together and make sense in our lives. When working from within existing practice new understanding develops when people in conversation seek previously unnoticed openings for their further refinement, elaborate, correct and co-construct meaning about the actions they are part of. As Chen & Pearce (1995) write, “to create a process that simultaneously expresses and constructs events and experiences” (p. 146). It is not only about ‘solving problems’, but also about being open to see new potentials and possibilities, affirming past and present strengths, successes, and potentials; to perceiving those things that give life to living systems.

In the chapter on literature I pointed out how, when something is uttered, it has the intention to touch the receiver and it will, according to Bakhtin (1981) *reach out and call the other into relation*. And the words, speech genre and intonation are intentionally aimed towards moving the other. When a person comes in contact with another living being in a given context, with their utterances, their bodily expressions, their words; their signs will arouse a response (Mead, 1934) based on *how the uttered sign strikes a cord; touches and gives resonance in the other person*. This will bring to life what we already know and have the effect of what Wittgenstein would call ‘reminders’ (1953, no.89). Through this touch fresh possibilities of possible new relations, experiences and actions may arise in a circular process. This is so to speak, the ‘heart’ of the dialogical process. In dialogical action research the participants will meet in not so structured conversations being open toward new, evolving understanding and open to transformation, moment by moment.

Dewey’s notion of ‘reflective imagination’ (Cronen & Lang, 1994) explains how human beings can respond in several ways to an impulse, rehearse the consequences of a response, without actually responding, see how these responses might close or leave channels open and be able to co-ordinate several possible responses in a single complex response. I see this as a description

of our ability to position ourselves 'outside' the actual situation and reflect on how we might want to respond. This ability to reflect in action, or take a step aside and reflect on action, and act on reflection (Schön, 1987) is part of the dialogical process and is useful in a dialogical action research.

5.4.2.Polyphony

In my view dialogical action research is an opportunity to see relationships first in one way, then in another. The idea of engaging different voices to explore the questions in focus is also inspired by what Bateson called 'the significance of multiple perspectives' or 'double description' (Bateson, 1972). According to Bateson, conditions for double descriptions allow distinctions to be drawn by recipients, and these distinctions provide the source for all new responses. Thus we might understand the same issue differently from various perspectives. When these different ways of understanding are put together, they might create new ideas about the issue in focus.

Thinking with 'another's voice in mind', is Shotter's (2004c) idea of inviting what we call theory into conversations in writing, talking or thinking. Instead of attempting to fit the theory, and words of the scholars "into an appropriate theoretical scheme in order to respond to them later, in *its* terms, we can turn ourselves responsively towards them immediately (p. 13).

The intention to do research this way is not, using Wittgenstein's words, to 'penetrate phenomena', but rather move 'towards the possibilities of phenomena' (1953, no.90). It is not aimed at explanatory theory, but at providing practical theory (Shotter, 2004b). I connect this to Cronen's (2000) thinking of inquiry, not as a way to support theory, but theory as a way to improve practice.

In planning research of this kind one should consider the fact that a dialogical process is unpredictable and uncertain and should be open to adjustments all along. A unit of inquiry in action research will aim at action and reflection in a reflexive process thereby creating more knowledge. This in its turn will influence the relationship between the participants involved.

What comes out of a case study in this type of inquiry regarding new understanding and possibilities will be experienced locally, Pearce & Chen (1995) explain. The voices of the

participants are privileged and "their publicly performed conversations and activities as well as their own interpretations of their life experiences are taken as the primary data" (p. 145).

5.5. Ethics

Ethics cannot be governed by rules and generalization Bakhtin (Morson & Emerson, 1990) claimed, but have to be localized in the particular situation. All work of judging will necessarily involve risks, a special attention to the particulars of the situation and a special involvement with unique other people at a given moment of their lives. Reason & Bradbury (2001) emphasise that a major rule in action research is to be clear about one's choices and their consequences. They assert that in scientific research one should be equally engaged in the process as in the results.

In addition to focusing on the ethical choices, power has to be faced as an important factor in the relationship between the participants in the process. The concept of 'voices' is often used especially in feministic oriented action research, and in the present work it is of obvious interest. According to Reinhartz (2001) we will, by dealing with voices, affect power relations. "To listen to people is to empower them and before you can expect to hear anything worth hearing, you have to examine the power dynamics of the space and the social actors" (Maguire, quoted in Reinhartz, 2001, p. 62).

5.6. Validity

Traditionally validity has involved issues of truth and correctness of statement (Kvale, 1996). It is expected that scientific results should be put to the test of generalization and prediction. I have argued that knowledge is local, from within, continually changing and is created through language. This means that the validity of scientific results, like in ethics, depend on the quality of reflection and action. When Kvale (ibid.) explains how validity can be defended by 'the quality of craftsmanship' he points at three factors to be present in order to make an investigation valid; to check, question and theorize. I feel that that an inquiry focusing on action and reflection and where a multitude of voices are encouraged, take care of these criteria and can claim to be good craftsmanship.

Quality may also be judged to which extent it makes sense to the reader and whether the process has given the participants the experience of taking part in a meaningful process. Reason & Bradbury (2001) claim that a sign of quality in an action research project is a sense on the

part of the participants of increased energy and agency and a feeling of empowerment by being involved. This being the case they may feel that they have developed fresh and useful insight by reaching a critical consciousness.

5.7. Privileged voices

In the introduction to this chapter I wrote that I intended to give privilege to voices claiming that knowledge is constructed in relationship and is to be understood in context. In other words I have been less attentive to those voices that might argue that an objective reality is there to be investigated and analysed. It would have been against the whole idea of this work to argue for an either-or-view. However, I still hope to be able to justify my choice of methods from what I feel useful and interesting, this not being an argument for the 'only' way of acting, reflecting and creating meaning.

Chapter 6, Dialogue as Method

You see it your way...
I see it my way
We can work it out,
We can work it out...
The Beatles

I will in this chapter give an account of how I have thought the research process can evolve, what I will do and why I have chosen to do it. I shall later, in the next chapter, give an account of my procedures more specifically for each stage in the process.

The dialogue is by nature open and unpredictable, so I will not make a rigorous plan for the dialogue process, but will let the process be influenced by the dynamics between utterance and response. The research questions will be the starting point for my/our curiosity, but I'll not let them direct me/us if something emerges that trigger curiosity.

6.1. Research Dialogue

My goal is to do a research from within; *from within Meercat's and my relation*, and *from within my practice*. Since my thoughts, decisions and actions are part of the practice, my reflections will be part of the knowledge from within.

The principal tool of this inquiry is the *research dialogue*. This is a session especially designed to allow the client and the therapist/researcher to take a meta position towards the therapy conversations and talk about the issues in focus. These research dialogues will be reflected on, through my reading the transcriptions and my thinking about them, then I will invite the voices of scholars to join in. I'll take some of these ideas back to Meercat and have new research dialogues with her, where we reflect on earlier reflections and how we can make them useful for our work. Following the idea of open-endedness I shall not draw definite conclusions but search for connections and understanding to inspire further collaboration between Meercat and me.

6.2. Different positions

I've invited Meercat's voice into the research process, but her position and contribution are determined on how the process develops and how much she will want to participate. I view the

project partly as a collaborative project, where we have the opportunity to reflect together on what we do and to use that for further collaboration, and partly as an opportunity for me to reflect on my own practice. At this point it is important to underline that my position is different from Meercat's. The difference between us, me being the therapist and Meercat the client, is crucial in considering the relationship between research and therapy. This inquiry is part of my MSc; I have taken the initiative to invite the client into a research project and I am committed to meet the academic standards for reporting on it. From Meercat's position the work we do together belongs to the context of help.

Even if Meercat also is interested in collaborating to understand more about the issues in focus, this does not mean we have the same interest in the whole process. I believe it is important and useful that Meercat and I talk and negotiate what is happening between us, what is useful, not so useful and how to make it more useful. But obviously it will not be equally important for Meercat to look into the various relationships and connections between theory and practice the way I do. I will discuss these issues as we go along.

6.3. More perspectives

My aim is that Meercat and I, through several research dialogues, and reflections on them, can share tentative ideas, opinions, questions and experiences. We will through an iterative spiral of dialogues reflect on action, act on reflection, while we continuously reflect in action, by which I mean to step aside and reflect on action. The ability to reflect in action is part of the dialogical process I want to create. I hope this process will enable us to make and to notice differences in our activities, and by doing so be able to coordinate our activities with each other in an intelligible way. Theses and syntheses, illuminating the research questions will through this process evolve and reflexively influence each other.

Part of this method is, through dialogues, to create polyphony of voices. The voices that appear in the process are Meercat's voice, my voice and my voice with 'another's voice in mind, these last voices are presented in the literature review, as the *voice-resource-bank*.

6.4. Reminders

I shall throughout the research process be focusing on what *struck, touched, gave resonance or reminded me* of earlier experience, in the different dialogues I engage in. I shall use these concepts for further inquiry, and see how the emerging dialogues may illuminate, connect and

relate to my research questions. Quotations and ideas from ‘the voice-resource-bank’ can also strike/touch and serve as reminders for further explorations and creation of meaning.

6.5. Summing up

The dialogical process will develop through a spiral of dialogues, drawing my attention to what *strikes me, touches me, gives resonance or reminds me* (or Meercat) of earlier experiences. The aim is to create space for different voices, to explore and evolve meaning. The process will evolve, by an alternation between mainly five types of dialogues:

1. Research Dialogues: conversations between Meercat and me, about earlier conversations/dialogue/reflections (as described below).
2. My Reflections on Research Dialogues: my understanding of what Meercat wants me to hear.
3. My Reflections with ‘another’s voice in mind’: my inner dialogues with voices from the voice-resource-bank.
4. ‘How to go on’ reflections: my reflections on the process so far, and thoughts about how to go on in the proceeding process.
5. Therapy Conversations.

6.6. Ethical implications

I know I can’t ‘give’ Meercat a voice, but I will do my best to contribute to a space where her voice is heard. My idea is that to talk, listen, acknowledge and reflect together has an empowering effect, therefore this research project is not just following a method, but it also reflects a therapeutic position and hence an ethical stance.

I will be mindful towards Meercat’s involvement through the process. When I choose to invite a client to participate⁸ in an action research process, I will be cautious of our relationship and how we are positioned towards each other. I will try to be as self-reflexive and relational reflexive as possible (Burnham, 1993) during our work together. I am both the responsible therapist, and researcher, who is doing a research as part of my master degree, while Meercat, is both client and participant in the research process. I think it is important, throughout the project, to emphasize that therapist/client relationship is the highest context. Meercat should feel free to choose at any time what position she wants to be in, co-researcher or client.

If I experience the co-research relationship as difficult, I will give priority to my position as therapist. Meercat is reminded that she can withdraw from participating in further research conversations whenever she wants. I have through out the research process alternative 'paths' to go down, so I am not dependent on Meercat's collaboration as a research participant with respect to carrying out the research project. These 'paths' could be reflections on my own, and with 'another's voice' in mind, without including Meercat more than she wants at any point. This being the case, it is nevertheless obvious that a full-scale dialogical action research project as outlined above will by definition depend on a fairly close collaboration with Meercat. Dilemmas and questions regarding the relationship between collaborative research and therapy will be further discussed in the concluding chapter.

Chapter 7, Action Process

I should never say: this is only words and
I have to go behind the words. Equally, when I have
asked someone something and he gives
me an answer (i.e. a sign)
I am content – that was what I expected.
Wittgenstein, 1953, no. 503

I shall in this chapter go through the whole action process. The process started in June 2003, with preparatory work. The research dialogues (RD) and the reflections, started in November 2003 and lasted until March 2004. My plan was to invite Meercat to one initial Research Dialogue, and decide ‘how to go on’, as the process evolved.

This was how the process evolved:

- Preparatory work
- First Research Dialogue (RD)
 - My Reflections on the 1st RD
 - My Reflections ‘with another’s voice in mind’, on the 1st RD
 - ‘How to go on’ Reflections, on the 1st RD
- Second Research Dialogue/Therapy Conversation
 - How the dialogue evolved
 - My Reflections on the 2nd RD
 - My Reflection ‘with another’s voice in mind’, on the 2nd RD
 - My Reflection on the process that led to a Therapy Conversation.
 - My Reflection on the Therapy Conversation ‘with another’s voice in mind’
 - ‘How to go on Reflections’ on the 2nd RD
- Third Research Dialogue
 - My Reflection on the Therapy Conversation.
 - My Reflections (on the above bit of therapy) ‘with another’s voice in mind’
- Fourth Research Dialogue (part of a therapy conversation)
 - My Reflections
 - ‘How to go on’ Reflections, after the 4th RD

7.1. Preparatory work

Preparatory work is described in Appendix C.

7.2. First Research Dialogue

Aims

To understand more about the relationship between Meercat's uttered experience of being heard and listened to, and my experience of having a listening stance. Develop ideas about the quality of the listening stance.

Method

Meercat and I had a 1-½ hour conversation. The starting point was the preparatory conversation we had had, and what both of us initially were concerned about: the relationship between the feeling of being heard and being listened to. The dialogue was allowed to evolve through a spontaneously expressive-responsive process, where I was trying to be attentive towards what *struck me, touched me, gave resonance or reminded me* of earlier experience. I audio taped the dialogue and transcribed it⁹.

7.2.1. My Reflections on the 1st RD

I read through the transcribed dialogue several times and underlined what touched me. I was trying to sense what I thought *Meercat would want me to hear or understand* about the issues we talked about. I recognised some themes Meercat seemed to be concerned/interested in. I selected extracts from the transcription, mainly using Meercat's expressions, and put them in four categories, in columns beside the transcription. The four categories were:

- 1) *Meercat's concerns, thoughts about how she is doing in therapy.*
- 2) *What Meercat does and 'needs'.*
- 3) *Meercat's description of how the therapist needs to meet her needs.* 4) *Meercat's experience of 'result'.*

I read this through, and tried to understand what Meercat told me about her 'needs' and concerns. Based on this I made an 'Anna's understanding of the 1. RD' (*see below*). Even if I still mainly used *Meercat's own words and expressions*, I was mindful about calling it 'Anna's

⁹ Due to confidentiality the transcriptions are not attached to this version of the dissertation.

understanding' , because I was the one who had made the punctuations, and extracted the words, utterances and expressions.

Anna's understanding of the 1st RD

- Meercat needs to have the space to:
waffle on without being stopped, carry on without making sense, repeat in the flow of the conversation, go over the same again, go back and forwards. Tell the never ending story.
- How Meercat wants to be met:
Let her talk without intervening or stopping her. Not move to something else, intervene or use power to decide what we are going to talk about. Not act superior or authoritative. Be sensitive to Meercat's various needs, and sense when she is raring to go on. Interact when Meercat needs. Look at her as a person, her emotions, body language and the whole concept. Be able to discuss if surroundings change.
- When she is met like this, Meercat feels:
warmth, love, trust and confidentiality. She feels rooted, valuable and in a place she is understood, at various needs at various times. That she is listened to when her mind is jammed and emotionally upset. She feels she is not put down or condescended. That Anna reads her.
- Meercat's experience of 'results' from therapy:
She is able to express her doubts, speaking it out, question herself, look for approval, sort little by little, but in the end decides for herself. And she is noticing that there is always something extra that comes along unexpected. She feels able to go home and deal with one or two things, go home and reflect on herself and the session. She doesn't feel so drained.
- Meercat is concerned with some issues:
Is she using the sessions in a useful way? Is it ok to use the sessions to talk about a mix of different issues? Is it too much for Anna, and can she (Anna) make sense of what is going on?

I will in the following reflections refer to ‘Anna’s understanding of the 1. RD’, by using quotation marks and letters in italics.

7.2.2. My Reflections with another’s voice in mind, on the 1st RD

Relational Responsiveness

It struck me how Meercat emphasized that I seem to have the ability to “*read(s) her*”. I connect this to Bakhtin’s (1981, 1984, 1986) interest in what happens between people in communication. When Meercat and I talk together I try to take in what she wants me to hear. But every utterance by Meercat is structured by the relationship between us, and all she says will be done with a view towards me, and the other way around. What Meercat says gets its form (is formulated) in the moment it is being said, dependent on the response she receives from me. She will, according to Bakhtin, search for an active understanding, orient herself towards me and try to have me to read her words.

Not being very verbally active I will communicate my feelings and understanding of what she says in other ways. When I refrain from interruption it may be perceived that I appreciate what she talks about. When she points out that I “*sense when she is raring to go on*”, she refers to the fact that I don’t interrupt and say something when I feel she has more to say. When she says that I look at “*emotions, body language and whole concept*”, I connect this to my effort to concentrate on following her emotional expressions and that I take care not to judge one thing to be more interesting than another. I try to watch the way she speaks and her intonation. As Voloshinov (1973) points out, the intonation is especially sensitive to all the vibrations in the atmosphere surrounding the speaker. I try to match my verbal and nonverbal responses to the emotional level I feel proper.

This reminds me how we *monitor* our conversations by using small signals confirming what is interesting, boring, exciting etc. What is perhaps meant as a sign of benevolent interest, may be received by the ‘talker’ as something she should elaborate on. Obviously we cannot *not* touch the one we talk to with our nonverbal responses. However, I am reminded by what Meercat mentions here, how little it takes to change the direction of a conversation.

The process of Understanding

I was impressed by Meercat's appreciation that she felt allowed to "*waffle on*" and "*carry on without making sense, repeat in the flow of the conversation, go over the same again, go back and forwards*".

Anderson & Goolishian (1988,1992) underscore that the therapist is not the expert of the life of the client. This has inspired me not to decide what should be said and how. Hence I am alert as to how my questions may direct the course of the conversation. Meercat is the one who will inform me about what she wants to inform me about. Consequently I do not as Meercat says, interrupt her or "*move to something else, intervene or use power to decide what we are going to talk about*". This attitude of mine may be the reason why Meercat experiences that her voice is worth hearing. However, I do not imagine Meercat's experience of being heard by the therapist as static and final. This is not only a matter of the patience of the therapist; it is may be more about an interest and curiosity; wondering 'is there more to come?' This connects to the notion of being understood, and understanding is part of the dialogical process, Bakhtin would say. Building on Bakhtin's writings (1984) I would say that it is a matter of sensing the other's inner dialogues in all their incompleteness and within their context. I believe there is a link here to the process described by Hafstad & Øvreeide (1998) as transcending oneself with curiosity and tuning in to the other. I think this is Weingarten's (1992) point when she explains how understanding requires the act of recognizing in another person another centre of consciousness. This may mean that, in the process of moving from the inability to understand to the ability to understand, one needs to develop the *ability to not understand*. I connect this to a listening stance; to be patient when you don't understand, and be interested in hearing more and be curious about what can emerge through the conversation.

Tolerance of Uncertainty

I am interested as listener and therapist when Meercat is telling "*the never ending story*", going "*back and forwards*", "*carry on without making sense*" and "*repeat*" herself. I don't feel the need for "*intervening or stopping her*" or use "*power to decide what we are going to talk about*" because I believe that there is always more to come. May be my experience of 'not knowing what to say' has a function; that Meercat feels all her voices are welcome into the dialogue. I don't experience it only as a matter of a *not-knowing*, but that we are, as Seikkula (2003) might say, creating a dialogical space for 'tolerance for uncertainty'. May be we have co-created a space where Meercat can speak without censorship. I wonder if we have created a

conversational space in which Meercat's voices dare to proceed tentatively and where there is nothing right or wrong to think or say.

Emerging voices

What happens when Meercat experiences being in a space as described above? Bakhtin says: "At any present moment of the dialogue there are great masses of forgotten meanings, but these will be recalled again at a given moment in the dialogue's later course when it will be given new life" (Bakhtin quoted in Holquist, 1990, p. 39). I connect this to Meercat's life, being engaged in endless dialogues, where she continuously tries to create meaning through communication with others around her. Meercat's remark, that there is "*always something extra that comes along unexpected*", struck me. May be she experienced the same that I had thought I had noticed, that there is movement in our talk, to the effect that she seems able express other voices? Meercat's recurring complaint about being let down by her family, changed and evolved in the course of the therapy process into conversations that involved talking about her own role and what she could do to relate better to her surroundings.

Vygotsky's (1986) talks about thoughts, as inner dialogues but as 'messy' and 'out of context' dialogues. He describes how these hurly burly inner dialogues may develop into outer dialogues. I connect this to our creating space for an evolving process, so Meercat can 'have it out, chew on it, hear it, take it back, try again etc.'

Vygotsky's understanding of the process of thoughts as inner dialogues being similar and different from outer dialogues, creates meaning in this context. When Meercat's thoughts, inner dialogues, are externalised, she has to make them understandable for herself and me. She has to make several choices, for instance, what kind of words to choose, what meaning she will put into the words, intonation. She will have to choose between many different connections and negotiate with me as the listener, about a definition of the context. This might be very different from the context she had vaguely imagined in her inner dialogues. Vygotsky would say that Meercat's thoughts are not merely expressed in words; they come into existence through them.

When Meercat notices that "*something extra comes along unexpected*" in the therapy conversations, I link it to these processes Vygotsky mentions. Meercat has *time* for her emerging voices. Sometimes we say '*I see*' to give the impression that we listen and are with our partner. But what may happen is that the speaker feels that enough is said, and therefore

doesn't say more. Out of politeness she might feel that she will not use more time to develop her thoughts

Context

Considering what I've written so far I think of the importance to create a space not only in terms of time but also in terms of an atmosphere *of safety* for Meercat to feel sure that it is in order to voice her emerging thoughts.

Roth (1999) is stressing the importance of context poses the question what it takes to feel safe enough to speak openly and listen openly so that interlocutors may change by the contact? This reminds me of how Meercat has emphasized the atmosphere in the therapy room. When I asked her in the first research dialogue how she could recognise the warmth, she replied by pointing to the smile on my face as I asked the question. She then went on to talk about "*interaction, listening, body language just everything, it's nice, comfortable, relaxed*" (In the transcribed 1st RD, appendix, p. xvii). Here she points to my use of non-verbal language. I'm trying to, as Bakhtin might have said, 'call out' acknowledgement and interest without using words. Meercat recognises this in my smiling face, and she calls it "*warmth and love*" (p. XIX). Here we have an example of what I mentioned earlier about monitoring what is said, without saying anything with words. Signs and gestures touch and move, as well as words.

'Loving relationships'

I'm touched by Meercat's use of the word *love*, and wonder how we can understand that in the context of therapy. Freud, in a letter to Bettelheim wrote (1982): "Psychoanalysis is in essence a cure through love" (front page). Can we connect this to what Simon Weil (2001) writes, 'just to stop and listen, is love'? Is *love* to have a space for one's voices to be heard by someone and acknowledged? And is this love then by a reflexive loop important for the ability to talk and think, and for change? May be Roger's client¹⁰ experienced a safe place, where she could think and talk, be listened to and feel that her voice was worth something?

If this is about *love*, how is it for Meercat to be engaged in a 'loving relationship'? This raises the question of dual consequences of love in human relationships. Love as liberating through creating a safe space from where to grow; and love as constraining through dependency and

¹⁰"I listened to myself while talking. And in doing so I would say that I solved my own problems", see Literature review p. 18.

leaving the lover vulnerable. What kind of constraints might that put on her relationship with me? What happens if she is disappointed or if she feels rejected or imposed upon my interest in her? And what about me, if love is part of the 'deal' in a way, what impact could that have on me? May be in other conversations, *friendliness* would feel a more appropriate word? Or may be a relationship of acceptance? To me these questions cannot be answered out of the dialogical context they are part of. As I see it, to be in a conversation is to be involved and to make us vulnerable towards each other, but it is also about being tentative and open to talk about the different aspects of the context. I would of course hope that Meercat and I would be able to reconstruct our conversations if, as she said, "*surroundings change*".

Empowerment

My understanding of Meercat's experience of results from therapy is that, "*she is able to express her doubts, speaking it out, question herself, look for approval, sort little by little, but in the end decides for herself*".

When reading this I am reminded of how Bakhtin (1984), Schafer (in Anderson, 1997) and Anderson (1997) understand the 'self' as constructed in conversations. I wonder how Meercat is constructing her stories about herself through our therapy conversation? Is her idea about being able to "*decide for herself*" part of a new empowered self-story? Is she constructing a story about herself as someone who can think, talk and reflect, and has a voice worth listening to. Someone who is worth loving?

Ambivalence

As I understood it Meercat expressed ambivalence concerning the therapeutic context:

I was struck by Meercat's concern about the relationship between us; "*is she using the sessions in a useful way? Is it ok to use the sessions to talk about a mix of different issues? Is it too much for Anna, and can she (Anna) make sense of what is going on?*"

I wonder how sure Meercat may be about the context of therapy. Have I been explicit about how I understand the context, about what kind of space I want us to create, and how I think the therapy sessions can be used? May be I've been too preoccupied with my own thoughts about the context, and not paid attention to Meercat's thoughts and expectations and negotiated it with her?

When Meercat wonders if I can make sense of what she is saying in therapy, I think of the long history of psychotherapy, where the therapist listens, as Billig (1999) would say, to 'subtle clues, which would indicate where the crucial hidden elements was to be found (p. 18). May be Meercat on some level is influenced by this popular view of how therapy works making an effort to be 'interesting enough' for her 'sophisticated' therapist.

Meercat wonders if it might be too much for me? Does she believe she has given me too much, unsystematized information, so it is difficult for me to make sense of it? May be it also is also about her showing me care and love, and worrying if I'm overwhelmed?

I believe that I may have taken the therapeutic context, as I understand it, too much for granted, and overlooked Bakhtin's (1981) point about how meaning and understanding are produced and can only be understood in context. Meercat's utterances will be affected by how she imagines my response and how she thinks it fits with my expectations. While I have been preoccupied by trying to show her, by what I think are tentative and friendly responses, that everything she says is welcome, she might have been concerned about her performance.

7.2.3. 'How to go on' Reflections, on the 1st RD

So far, I think this process has created more understanding about how my listening affects Meercat, and how I can act to be helpful. My response is important, as understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other. I understand *Meercat's need*, as a need for being heard by someone who is interested in what she wants to say, someone who wants to hear more and who will acknowledge whatever she says.

When you are working on such emerging thoughts you need time, and the listener must not stress the process. For Meercat, this is also a matter of safety and a space where she can search for, develop and create meaning out of all the dialogues she has been part of through out her life.

To me this means that I have to experience her and listen to her as a unique person, someone who has something to say that I am interested in hearing, and would like to hear more about. I will listen without interruptions, with friendliness and acceptance. If I am able to follow her, I have to be sensitive to when she wants to tell more and try to read her different expressions

(intonations, gestures, etc). I must tune in on her emotionally, and respond back with facial expressions, body language as well as with words.

Meercat and I are co creating a space where she might feel that:

- ‘I’m heard, my voice is worth listening to, even when it doesn’t make sense. In this space, were all my voices are worth listening to, there also exists a space for voices to evolve, be uttered and heard. When all my voices are of value I’m someone worth listening to. I’m someone who can think, talk, reflect and be loved’.

This requires a benevolent partner, a listener who welcomes Meercat’s voices, who:

- takes a responsive stance, is interested, curious and acknowledges her voices, is sensitive and emotionally tuned in on the uniqueness of her being, and thereby creates a space for a reflexive process where she can explore and express herself.

This might be useful as *a listening stance reminder*.

A glance at the Research Questions¹¹

During my work with the research dialogues and the reflections I experience a connection between how I listen and how Meercat feels heard. I also believe that I have got a deeper understanding of the qualities of this listening stance. I think this will be useful in my further collaboration with Meercat. But at the same time there is obviously also an ambivalence here that it is necessary for Meercat and me to talk about. I’ll take with me to clinical work elsewhere this reminder about the importance of continually negotiating the context.

I had not planned to elaborate on the third research question in this first part of the inquiry. However, Meercat’s feeling that “*there is always something extra that comes along unexpected*” precisely describes the notion of new voices. These bear the signs of richer, less rigid thoughts about the relationships around her.

It will be interesting to see if the knowledge about how to listen will make me a better listener and if this will invite more of Meercat’s voices to be expressed. A little later in the process I

¹¹ 1. What is the relationship between the Meercat’s feeling of being heard and the therapist taking a listening stance? 2. What is the quality of the listening? 3. What is the relationship between the Meercat’s feeling of being heard and her emerging voices? The 4th research question will be reflected on in Chapter 8.

thought we could evaluate this, possibly watching a videotape from a therapy session or talking about our experiences after a therapy session.

Based on these reflections, I decided to ask Meercat if we could have a new research dialogue.

7.3. Second Research Dialogue/Therapy Conversation

Aims

I wanted to continue the dialogue about the connection between being heard and listening, and check with Meercat if I had understood her the way she wanted me to understand her. I had some ideas about what I would like to know more about and I wanted to talk more about what I had called *Meercat's concerns*. Further I wanted to explore with her, if and how we could use 'Anna's understanding of the first research dialogue', with some changes (if Meercat had some comments), as basis for our further relationship and collaboration. Could my 'listening stance reminders' be helpful?

Method

Meercat and I had a 2-½ hour research dialogue. I gave her a choice between reading the whole transcript of the 1st RD or just 'Anna's understanding' of it. Meercat chose to read the latter. The conversation started just after she had finished reading. The dialogue was allowed to evolve through spontaneously expressive-responsive process, where I tried to be attentive towards what struck me, touched me, gave resonance or reminded me of earlier experience. The dialogue that evolved was audio taped and transcribed.

7.3.1. How the dialogue evolved

The conversation with Meercat was planned to be a long research conversation. However, in the course of 20 minutes it developed into a therapy conversation where Meercat began to talk about highly sensitive and personal things, outside the scope of research dialogue. This change will be taken up in detail below. As described in the discussion about ethics, in the chapter on Dialogue as Method, it was clear to me that I am Meercat's therapist first and foremost. I chose neither to finish the conversation nor to state that this was not any longer a research conversation.

In my judgment the voice that emerged expressed something very difficult and sensitive and Meercat should be allowed to go on and not be disturbed. I could have turned her attention to what happened, may be that had made her more secure? But when it happened and also when I heard through the tape I thought it would be better not to interrupt. This is supported by her statement of the importance of not being interrupted when *“she is raring to go on”*.

Based on what happened in this second dialogue I have chosen to divide the reflections in two parts, first to discuss what happened in the first 20 minutes (the research part) then about the later events that I shall describe as the therapy part.

I will use quotation marks and letters in italics when I refer to what Meercat said in the 2nd research dialogue/therapy conversation.

7.3.2. My Reflections on the 2nd RD

After the second research conversation and after having read the transcription I noticed that after Meercat had read ‘Anna’s understanding of the first research dialogue’ she felt she had been heard. Not only when she said *“you got it 100%”*, but also when she elaborated what she had said in the last research conversation. Meercat said more about how important it was *“to talk back and forth”* and *“what relief it was to be allowed to say what I wanted to say”*. Also this time she stressed the importance of being heard, saying, *“I don’t feel that I’m being heard outside by anybody else. I feel that I’m more of a nuisance and that I’m not worth listening to”*. Here too, Meercat links the feeling of being listened to to a sense of being a person of value.

Impressive was also Meercat’s use of the metaphor of jigsaw. For her therapy is *“like a great big jigsaw, I’m raving, you know putting the pieces together and sometimes taking the pieces back out, because they’ve not fit properly. It’s like that. And then may be later on putting that piece back again, um”*.

7.3.3. My Reflection ‘with another’s voice in mind’, on the 2nd RD

Meercat’s use of the metaphor of *jigsaw*, which she is raving to put together, really *touched me*. It became even clearer how she is in the process of putting her life together and what a strain that must be.

Again I'm thinking of Vygotsky's (1986) descriptions of the difference between inner and outer dialogues. Even if Meercat 'rehearses' the utterance she is going to say one cannot say for certain that what comes out is the same as what she has thought. This transition from thought to word is a continuous process, a movement back and forth, from thought to word and from word to thought. That is precisely what Meercat does with her pieces of jigsaw, "*raving to put the pieces together*", speaking back and forth and repeating herself. In the course of this process changes will occur: Meercat's thoughts are not only expressed by words, but as mentioned before, they come into existence through them.

Billig (1996) argues that thinking is a kind of inner argumentation and would perhaps say that what Meercat is doing is arguing with herself in this inner process. Her many voices are in dialogical movement and may not quite agree what to mean. For this reason Bakhtin would not call Meercat's long incessant utterances, without interruptions, monologues.

When Meercat says that she is "*sometimes taking the pieces back out, because they've not fit properly*" I also think about how she tries out her thoughts by expressing them and thereby hearing them. Mead (1934) explains how we arouse, not only a response in the person we speak to, but also arouse the same tendency in ourselves by speaking out. Meercat will respond to her own stimuli as other people respond; when she is saying something, she is saying it to herself as well. It seems as if Meercat needs to hear what she is saying, withdraw it, modify, change etc. in a continuous process. I am impressed by how important it is to hear oneself talk, *touch oneself* and how underestimated this is in our human intercourse. We think people say something because they want to inform us but they may to an equal degree want to tell it to themselves. I think it is crucial to make room for these thought processes and I connect this to Meercat's saying in the 1st research dialogue, that "*something extra comes along unexpected*". That was what happened in this research conversation, when it suddenly changed into a therapy session. My role then was to witness and warrant Meercat's new voices as they emerged.

7.3.4. My Reflection on the process that led to a Therapy Conversation

Twenty minutes into the second research dialogue Meercat began to tell me that she had been wakened up by the phone:

"I've heard my dad calling me, there's Peter, that's calling me, I've heard Jack calling 'mum' ...I go and put the log on, it's no calls and it's woke me up, you know. I keep

thinking you know, why? Bells ringing, wake up, you know. What are you trying to tell me, what do I need to know? What do I have to wake up to?"

I was intrigued by this new voice beginning to talk about the father, now dead, who had abused her during her childhood. This was a story she had never told anyone before. I wondered why this new voice appeared on this very point in time.

Immediately after this conversation I thought there might be a connection between what happened in our talk and an experience of being heard. Could it be that it was something in this research itself that had given Meercat an experience of being heard? Had what I had written in "Anna's understanding of the 1st research question" given her a feeling of being understood, a feeling of being appreciated? Could it also be because several times during that conversation I had assured her that it was OK to use the sessions as she did? Or did it have an effect that I had addressed 'Meercat's concerns', and was clearer about the context of the therapy so that this new voice could find a place? I brought these questions with me to the next stage in the process.

7.3.5. My Reflection on the Therapy Conversation 'with another's voice in mind.

Bakhtin (Holquist, 1990) says that everything we have experienced as hidden, is forgotten meaning, and can one day, when the time is right, be recalled. May be that is what happened in this conversation when Meercat's terrible childhood memories were recalled? I think of these forgotten memories as voices not being activated. That might be what Billig (1999) thinks when he says that there is no hidden mental life, everything can be heard if we just listen well enough. Meercat, he might say, has no secrets hidden from herself, but what she says is dependent on rules about 'what is proper', 'acceptable', 'safe' etc. to talk about. The 'unmentionable' is now mentionable. As listener in the therapeutic context I believe my contribution was to help Meercat decide what was appropriate or not to say. My listening without interruptions, welcoming repetitions etc., might be understood as a sign saying; 'all thoughts and utterances are valid, and there is not just one way of saying, thinking or acting that is the right one'.

I wonder if I am emphasizing this stance by:

- Doing this research as a collaborative project: thus saying '*your voice is worth listening to*'.

- Hearing what she said in the 1st RD: thus saying *'I can hear your voice'*.
- Setting the context straight: thus saying *'you can use the sessions the way you do'*.
- Repeating several times that the way she uses the sessions is ok: thus saying *'all your voices are welcome, use the time you need'*.

7.3.6. 'How to go on Reflections' on the 2nd RD

After the second research dialogue I no longer felt it necessary to ask Meercat to go through videotapes. This was because it would have taken too much of her time and because I felt that what evolved in the second research dialogue was enough for the time being to shed light on *the relationship between Meercat's feeling of being heard and the emergence of new voices*. Instead I became interested in looking into whether my more thorough understanding of what listening means, could be seen or heard in therapy. Based on this I made an appointment to have a new RD with Meercat.

7.4. Third Research Dialogue

Aims

I wanted to know how Meercat experienced the 2nd RD and how she understood what in my opinion was a change from research to therapy. And how she had experienced the therapy conversation.

This was a very short conversation. My plan to proceed with a third RD changed. I found that Meercat was reluctant to talk about what happened in the research/therapy-session described above. I felt that what was 'unmentionable' for her, the story about her childhood, was difficult to speak about and more so from a meta perspective, that is from a research perspective. I didn't feel it would have been ethical to proceed as planned at this point so I decided I would wait and see if we had another opportunity later on.

Instead I listened to the tape and read the transcript from the 2nd RD, and reflected on how I had experienced my listening in the therapy part of the session. This is an example of what often occurs in action research; you have to change your plans according to the feedback you get.

7.4.1. My Reflection on the Therapy Conversation

Sitting down with Meercat, hearing her story about her father, I wondered in the beginning why this story appeared just now. As the story developed I understood that she was speaking of something I had not heard before. This made me particularly attentive of what to do. My fresh

knowledge of the significance of listening was a good help. I felt able to be interested in what she related and to show her that I would appreciate hearing more. Our previous talk about what she wanted from me and why it was useful, made me feel safer in my position as listener. It was as if *I had been given permission to listen*, and Meercat permission to talk.

I was touched by the vulnerable quality of this voice. Therefore I told her on several occasions that *I would appreciate hearing more but that she did not need to tell more than she liked*. I observed, through her way and pace of speech, the intonation, body language and the words she used, that we had to proceed with great care. Consequently I was observant of the pauses and did not to fill them with my words. I tuned in as best I could on Meercat, feeling in my own body how I tried to take in her pain. When Meercat cried, or struggled with her tears, I said little. All the time I had my inner talks reminding me that each small sign I showed her would push the conversation in one direction or another. I felt it difficult not to say something to relieve her pain. At the same time I thought that this is something that Meercat has carried for more than 50 years and I thought that it must first and foremost *be heard*.

I felt, heard and saw, that it was shocking for Meercat to talk about her childhood and the father's abuse. Still I thought about what she had told me previously when she said:

“this wooden thing...that needs all this out, once and for all, so I can ooohhh, relax, just relax!!”

This was the last thing she said before she began telling about her father. Toward the end of the session that lasted longer than the usual 60 minutes Meercat said that it was a relief to be allowed to tell her story.

7.4.2. My Reflections (on the above bit of therapy) 'with another's voice in mind'

I am reminded of Bakhtin's notion of the “superaddressee” (1986) by Meercat's emphasis on the importance of being heard. Bakhtin talks about the nature of the word that wants to be heard, always seeks responsive understanding, and does not stop at immediate understanding but presses on further and further and seeks a superaddressee's *just* understanding. Even if there is not someone present in the conversation, Bakhtin argues that the one who is talking will have a wish or urge for someone ‘out there’ who will eventually understand. When *Meercat repeats herself, waffles on, tells the never ending story and goes over the same again and again*, we might understand her actions as seeking just understanding. If we all hope for a listener who will understand, therapy might also be about meeting a person, a therapist, which can give your

utterances a 'just understanding'. I believe I might have been the one who has filled this purpose for Meercat. When the word is heard it does not need to be searching indefinitely.

7.5 Fourth Research Dialogue (part of a therapy conversation)

7.5.1. My Reflections

When Meercat returned to therapy after a long break because of Christmas I saw that much had changed. She said that she felt better and that her need for therapy was not so strong any more. For us, the team and I, it was remarkable how her outer appearance had changed.

She was radiant and gave signs of energy and agency. After a while Meercat was offered a full time job and decided to take a longer break in therapy with a view to finishing it.

This therapy conversation was not intended as a research dialogue, but since there was to be an interval in the therapy we used some time to talk about what had happened in the course of this therapy and we also talked about the research part of it. Again, I got the impression that Meercat confirmed that our talks had been useful. She said something that particularly struck me about the session where we had talked about her childhood:

“I wanted it to be out, but I didn't want it to be out. And I was surprised, or shocked really, um. But that's what the therapy has obviously done, hasn't it Anna, I mean. I know that sometimes I felt in the sessions, I am here, I know that and I've never said it before because um, I didn't feel to be understood there.”

Meercat explained why the story had come:

“I've moved on? As they say, I mean, I'm not the little 3-4 year old girl anymore... But I remember feeling, um, like I was the little girl, like I was back there. I wanted to make myself understood. Because no one ever did I was never heard as a child, I was never allowed to speak let alone be heard.”

My understanding is that Meercat said that the little girl, who nobody had ever listened to, was eventually heard. The story was hard to tell, but as Seikkula (2003) might put it, the not yet said, the inexpressible, was expressed. I understood it as an expression of liberation, the feeling she had at last was 'relief, release' and she expressed a new self-story:

“I feel grown up in many ways... the counselling... enabled me to become a lot, lot stronger, definitely, in many areas.... I do get the odd still where I feel really down and think you know, why does it have to be this and, but then I do kind of snap out again

whereas before when I first started to come to counselling I think it overtook me” And later: “I am able to...go home, shut my door, put music on soft and think about nothing, I can’t remember a time when I was able to do that, really.”

And concerning my lack of verbal communication, Meercat said:

“..lets be honest Anna, if you’d talked more, I wouldn’t have been able to talk as much! So, (laughter) and that’s what I had to do in the past, just keep talking and talking.”

Later:

I mean it has been at least..18 months, there was virtually no interruptions, there was the warmth there was, you know the feeling that you were there, but you just let me go, and I don’t think as much would have come out had you done it different and I think its only as I...as I’ve been allowed to handle little things at a time, myself, that you’ve talked more.

7.5.2. ‘How to go on’ Reflections, after the 4th RD

At this point Meercat got a full time job and it became difficult for her to give priority to the research project. I decided to finish our work, concentrating on writing down the present report. My wish had been for Meercat and me to make a summary together to evaluate what had come out of the research project. However, I now realized that this was surely more ‘my’ project than hers. Meercat and I made an appointment so that Meercat could read what I had written and make her comments¹².

¹² See Epilogue p. 65.

Chapter 8, Critique

”the ultimate word of the world
and about the world has not yet
been spoken....everything is still
in the future and will always be in the future.
Bakhtin, 1984

This last chapter is an attempt to examine retrospectively with a critical eye some of the issues presented in this research on the role of listening in clinical dialogues as well as of the method of inquiry. This critique is structured by revisiting the four research questions formulated in chapter 3.

8.1. First Research Question.

What is the relationship between Meercat’s feeling of being heard and the therapist taking a listening stance?

8.1.1. Relationship

The initial assumption was that such a relationship exists. The clinical material gives in my opinion a reasonable confirmation that this is the case, at least as far as this particular client-therapist relationship is concerned. Moreover, the clinical material and the theoretical underpinning of the dialogical nature of all social relations indicate that the assumed relationship is a mutual, circular one. As therapist, my aim was to offer an opportunity for Meercat to feel heard and understood. In this case I did that by attentive listening, and Meercat responded positively to that. This in turn encouraged me to proceed in my listening as if having got permission. And so the circle continues.

8.1.2. Client’s feeling of being heard

Meercat connects her being heard to an increased sense of *worth*, to being ‘*a moral person*’, ‘*grown up*’ that is, her *self* is changed. She ‘discovers’ new aspects of self as new voices in her inner dialogues emerge. This requires a warranting listener to receive and hear these voices. Meercat’s pain is reduced in an active ‘sorting’ process that is encouraged by the therapist’s listening. She expresses emotional *relief* as if she has been freed from a burden.

8.1.3. Effect on therapist

The circular effects also made me more confident in my role. My inner voices had prompted me to go in different directions; I was sometimes tempted to offer active consolation and advice, other voices encouraged me to keep on listening attentively and acceptingly. The more I got feedback, during the research process as to the value of the latter, the more confident I became in my listening approach. But it should not be denied that my original ideology, as apparent in my choice of literature and how I selected ‘voices of others’¹³, was also a strong factor. The assumption behind the first research question can therefore to some extent be considered a self-fulfilling prophecy.

8.2. Second Research Question

What is ‘the quality’ the listening stance?

Such a stance may be described by pointing to six aspects. These are presented separately for the sake of clarity. In reality they are all intimately related and occur in one gestalt.

8.2.3. Non interruption

I let Meercat take the lead, deciding what to talk about and how, and was careful not to intervene or interrupt as long as she seemed to be engaged in her talking. This stance may make space for sorting out confusion and develop new voices thereby making it possible for them to be ‘mentionable’. This stance also places responsibility for work on the client. Change, as in evolving understanding, is her job and option, and she is offered room to do it. At this point a therapist may encounter the temptation to “clear up” things, by doing this kind of sorting herself. The stance discussed here may encourage withstanding such a temptation

8.2.4. Acceptance

I, as the therapist showed acceptance in various ways, not only by limiting my own verbal activity, but also by showing warmth in my body language and facial appearance. A point in this respect might be that such an attitude cannot by definition be action only of *will*, it must be *spontaneous* to be perceived as authentic.

¹³ From the voice-resource-bank, page 17.

8.2.5. Safety

Meercat seemed to feel safe in the company of a fairly quiet therapist. In this case listening seemed to enhance safety. In other cases it is conceivable that such listening would have evoked anxiety. The relationship between listening and safety is therefore a complex one, and should be considered from case to case, or more correctly from one therapy to the other, since the question of safety also is related to the therapist's feeling safe.

8.2.6. Time

Listening implies giving a client time to reflect and attend to her inner voices and dialogues. Meercat puts this point clearly. The more I talk the less Meercat has time to talk. This aspect touches also on the notion of pace. A listening stance as discussed here means following the rhythm and pace of the client.

8.2.7. Space

Therapeutic listening means creating a relationship which implies a space for the unfolding of a client's potential. It means opening up ways of expression that have not been possible or allowed in previous relationships. This space is a phenomenon not easy to describe. It is not a state in client or in therapist; it is an evolving relationship, a process co-created and negotiated continually. The present study gives examples of how important and difficult it is to keep these considerations of context in mind.

8.2.8. Attentiveness

Therapeutic listening is not passive silence. It requires keen attention and a readiness to give signs of a continual interest in everything the client may express. Above all it implies curiosity on the part of a therapist, a curiosity that shows itself as an interest and an eagerness to engage with and be informed by the client. This again cannot be merely a deliberate technique but must grow out of a philosophy and an integrated attitude in the therapist. In times of stress and anxiety in the therapeutic process, this requirement is obviously not easy to fulfil.

8.3. Third Research Question

What is the relationship between Meercat's feeling of being heard and her emerging voices?

8.3.1. The notion of inner voices

The concept of *self* in this study is not a thing, but a polyphony of dialogues in a person's mind and between this person and others. Since *self* in this sense is a *social* self, its expressions are limited by all the restrictions, taboos and rules characterizing social life.

8.3.2. Listening to inner voices

The present clinical material and the theoretical considerations in this study indicate that to be valid a voice must be heard. The quality of listening seems to encourage the voicing of the client's inner talk. The aim of dialogical therapies may be thought of as to encourage those voices that have been inexpressible, not found their proper expression or voices that have not felt heard in outer dialogue, to feel welcome in the therapeutic relationship.

8.4. Fourth Research Question

What may be a proper methodology and method of investigating the above questions?

The term Dialogical Action Research should be considered as an object of study for its own sake. The model is an attempt to combine a dialogical way of thinking and some major features of action research. The latter is based on the notion of an emancipatory effort to change some circumstances. This is done in collaboration with the ones who want the change and is continually based on reflexivity; hence it must rest on a flexible design. In a clinical context this implies inviting the client(s) into a collaborative effort to enhance change (therapy) and to gain knowledge (research). I will attempt to critique the model from several angles.

8.4.1. How do the therapeutic and the research part relate to each other?

How therapy was influenced by research: In this case the method of research dialogues seemed to give Meercat a feeling of being understood, and also a meta view that was useful for both of us in our joint work. Here the question of ethics is particularly relevant. There are definite limits to how much you can require of a client. I believe the therapist/researcher should always privilege therapy over research if the two considerations are in conflict. The client has her rights as a client who seeks help, irrespective of her role in a research project.

How the research was influenced by therapy: The idea of dialogue in this approach turns the mind of the researcher to the expertise of the other who in return may offer a rich amount of

insight and knowledge. The collaborative style of work means being continually prepared for changes in the approach. This requires a good deal of flexibility in the researcher.

8.4.2. Possibilities and limitations of Dialogical Action Research

Possibilities: As stated above a collaborative approach like this with the client and researcher/therapist on relatively equal terms gives an extraordinary opportunity to gain knowledge, in this case about the effects of therapeutic listening and the phenomenon of the emergence of inner voices. This method illustrates what Shotter (1993) meant by the notion of understanding ‘from within’.

Another feature of the model is the incorporation of the perspectives of others, introduced by Shotter (2004) as ‘reflections with another’s voice in mind’. In the present study these voices were inputs from scholars and from teams in the clinical setting. Looking back I feel strongly that this extension of dialogue in the work has been creative, enhanced my own learning and created exciting new understanding.

Limitations: This study shows that for the client therapy is the highest context to give meaning to whatever happens in her work with a therapist. A client in psychotherapy, even if she is eager to fill the role of co-researcher, will always be sensitive to the therapeutic relationship. She may want to please the therapist, she may be reluctant or unwilling to expose something, or she may want to quit therapy altogether. All this is her right as a client, but may disturb a research process. In the present study I feel this was not of significant importance. But in other cases such an approach might be difficult and even impossible for the reasons mentioned.

The choice of other voices (literature) influencing the knowledge creation is of course always limited, and there will always be a danger that the dialogical research process will be more monological than wished. If I were to take this research a step further I would want to incorporate some voices that challenge the dialogical view of the human psyche.

8.4.3. The question of generalizing

The results from any research may be placed on a continuum from those that have a local aim to those that claim universal generalisation. It is obvious that the present study should be placed fairly close to the former. One reason is that I have used only one, as a matter of course, *unique*

case, as all cases are. Thinking dialogically I also include the therapist, which means that this is a story about *one unique therapist*, as all therapists are.

A fairly consistent listening stance as described in this study may be therapeutic for some clients but not for others who might need more direction to be safe. Meercat had a long history of not being heard and might have had a stronger need than others to experience 'just understanding', hence the present findings should be considered fairly local.

However, local as they are they have inspired my work, having had an encouraging and empowering effect on me as therapist, as well as researcher. Still, in terms of generalisation I think this inquiry confirms the importance of general values like warmth and commitment in the therapist and findings from other studies about the significance of the therapeutic relationship. Recent research (Duncan and Miller, 2000) points to the importance of the relationship between the therapist and client in discussing the effects of psychotherapy. However, the specific content of this factor is not elaborated very much. The present study may contribute to filling this gap by emphasizing the significance of *listening and cooperation*.

8.4.4. Possible methodological alternatives and supplements

As stated above a research design with one case has its limitations. A Dialogical Action Research model could in principle be used with more cases in one study and if so it would probably have given more dimensions to the questions addressed. For instance one could have looked into how therapeutic listening is shaped by the responses of different clients. However, as is hopefully apparent in this study, to do clinical research of this kind requires much work and willing clients, which would have been far outside the scope of a master's degree. It could also have been interesting to do a conversational analysis (i.e. Scenkein, 1978) particularly the turn taking between client and therapist, relating this to the quality of their relationship, including the aspect of listening.

8.5. Is a conclusion possible?

As stated by Bakhtin in the beginning passage of this chapter, the ultimate word has not yet been spoken, everything will always be in the future. This is also the case with the questions addressed in this study. As in therapy so also in research new ideas and insights evolve in an indefinite process lasting long after the work is done. Therefore I will abstain from definite conclusions both regarding the phenomenon of therapeutic listening and about the model of dialogical action research. Still I am sure that this bit of combined therapy and research have

given me inspiration to go on to explore further the various qualities and dimensions of listening.

I hope this study has contributed to creating some new ideas and meaning not only for Meercat and me, but also for those who are interested in therapy as co-creation of meaning. Thanks to all the participants, including the ones to whom this paper is addressed for co-constructing the research project. You have all, for more than a year been taking part in my inner dialogues.

And I offer very warm and sincere thanks to Meercat. If you had not taken part, this research would never have been done and I would not be the person I am today. Thank you Meercat!

Epilogue

When I had finished writing the dissertation I gave Meercat a copy to read, she commented:

“I found it really interesting. In the beginning it was a bit daunting. I dreaded to start reading, I didn’t know what to expect, but as soon as I picked it up I read it all through, every bit of it...I understood it...it made me reflect even more...To have it all there in black and white... I felt so valuable... In some way I felt I’d been a valuable asset. It was about me, and it feels great to be a part of it... I appreciated what you wrote about that each and everybody is a unique person. This has enabled me to go on... A lot of people don’t understand that about being touched by the inner voice, to me it has been so valuable to be able to express it, because I think I’d dismissed it for so many years. And you let me just parroting away. I was like a parrot you know, and you sat there and listened...”

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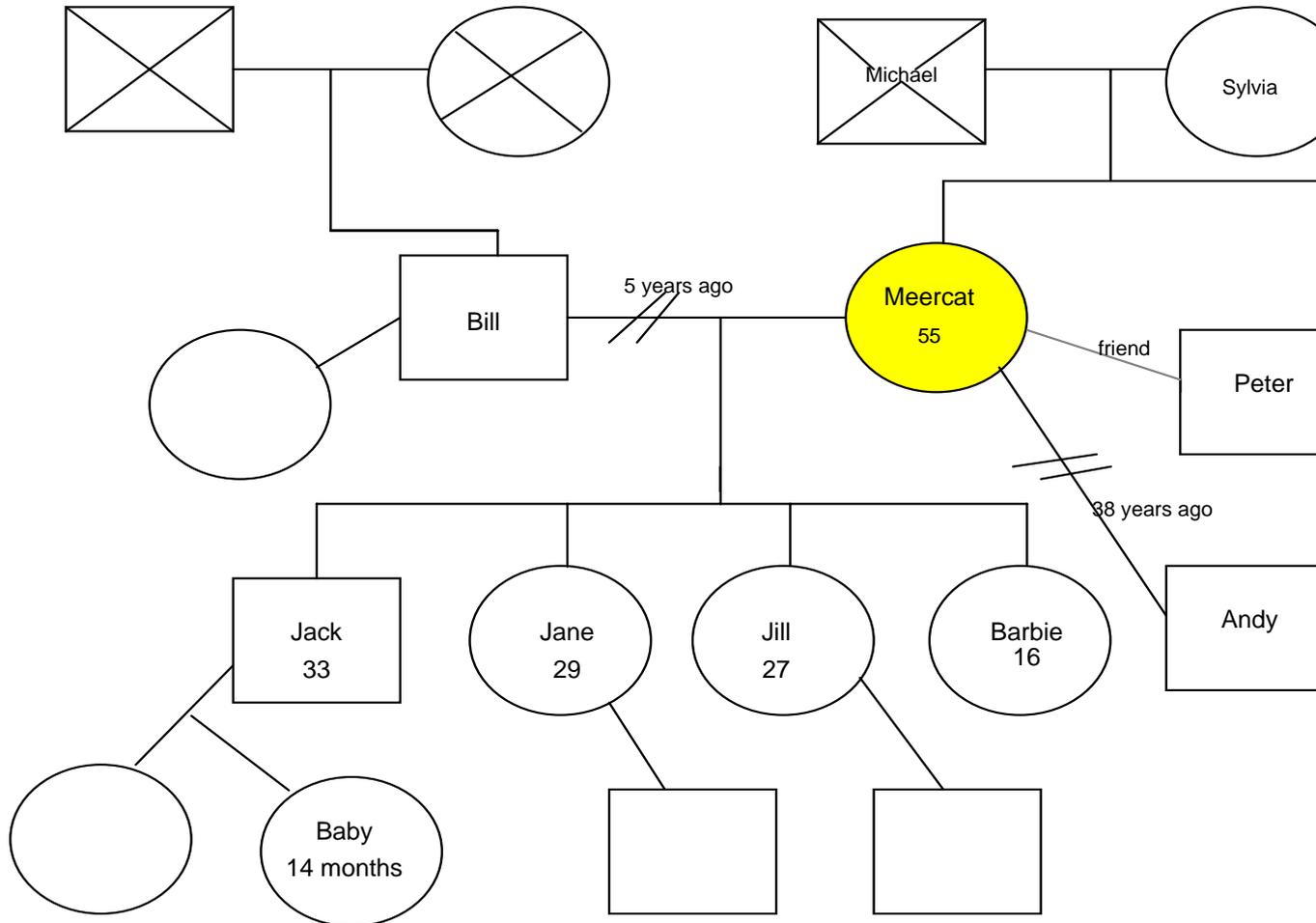
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Meercat's genogram



Preparatory work

Aim:

Explore and decide how Meercat can be involved in the research.

Clarify if she shares my interests in exploring the relationship between us.

Clarify the ethical implications with the supervisor at my workplace.

Develop curiosity and the research questions.

Know more about how I am going to conduct the research.

Method:

A conversation with Meercat about her involvement, watch a video of a session she thinks was useful. A conversation with supervisor about ethics, and consent from the head of my workplace.

Reading literature, talking with tutors and colleagues, and reflect by myself on the issues that develop.

Result:

Meercat agreed to be a participant (appendix B) , and collaborate in part of the process. The clinic manager decided I didn't need to go through an ethics committee, connected to the workplace. I made some vague plans, wrote down ideas, decided on an action research design. Became very aware of having to evaluate and change direction, dependent on process and Meercat's feedback. I will have to describe the process in the dissertation and explain why I made the decisions I did. I made a draft concerning issues I wanted to explore and developed the research questions.