

This handout is based on information in Finlay, L. (2015). *Relational Integrative Psychotherapy: Process and Theory in Practice*, Chichester, Sussex: Wiley.

Chapter 12 Existential phenomenology: theory and therapy

Existential phenomenology aims to do justice to everyday experience, evoking what it is to be human. Phenomenological therapists focus on embodied experience and the meanings of that experience in the here-and-now (Finlay, 2011) and ask questions like “What is this kind of experience like?” “How are you experiencing this in your body right now?” Rather than trying to ‘repair’, ‘change’ or educate the client, the point is to discover the experiences and values/perspectives that have shaped the client while together therapist and client explore choices re: being and becoming in the future.

The two philosophical fields of ‘existentialism’ and ‘phenomenology’ are separated by a blurred line¹. Taken together the field can be understood in terms of two main ideas: a focus on **existential life questions** and the application of the **phenomenological attitude**.

Existential life questions

Who are you? - Who are you as a person? Don’t just think about your roles and what you do. How do others’ views of you differ from your own?

How do you experience your body? Does it feel small, graceful and fragile or big and ungainly? Invaded or sucked dry? And your sexual body? Are there bits of your body you feel disconnected from?

What makes your life worth living and gives meaning? What’s important to you? Friends, family, work? Are you doing the things you want to do? What’s your work-life balance?

How are you subjectively experiencing time/space? Do you feel time as a constant pressure with time rushing by or is it going slowly and stretching out? Do you feel secure and at home or are you in a public place that feels less safe? Is there another space you would like to be in, and if so, why?

The phenomenological attitude

The phenomenological attitude can be summarised as comprising three main processes which focus on: ‘Being’ ‘bracketing’ and ‘description’:

Being - Three specific modes of therapist *Being* are relevant:

- *Being human* – Here we allow the ‘cloak of professionalism’ to fall away, in order to be present as a person who is prepared to be impacted and changed, just as the client is impacted and changed (Barnett & Madison, 2012) - (a ‘we’ rather than ‘you’ approach).

¹ Many of the ‘big names’ in the existential field like Sartre and de Beauvoir were also phenomenologists, while phenomenological philosophers like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty can be seen as existentialists (though Heidegger never liked that label being attached to him) in that they are interested in the nature of *being*.

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- *Being open* – The existential phenomenological therapist aims to be alive to creative possibilities; ready to explore the unknown; open to the client as a person (rejecting a reductionist gaze and the ‘bad faith’ of focusing on diagnostic labels); and prepared to open their own self to confrontation with existential givens.
- *‘Being-with’* – Existential therapists ask, “What is happening in the mysterious space between myself and the client? The reality of the *being-with* is greater than the shared sum of the experience of therapist and client (Hycner, 1993). Meeting is healing (Buber, 1958).

Bracketing - Bracketing is enacted alongside a genuine sense of curiosity, empathy and compassion. Bracketing means putting previous knowledge into metaphorical brackets holding it aside but still in awareness. This process is *not* one of eliminating subjectivity and bias. Instead, it’s an especially focussed attitude of receptivity, an emptying of the self in order to be filled by the other. The aim is “to see through fresh eyes, to understand through embracing new modes of being” (Finlay, 2008, p. 29). Phenomenologists believe therapists have an ethical responsibility to respect and be open to the *otherness* of the Other. While recognising my potential power as a therapist, I also try to hold myself to being humble and modest in any claims, for instance, to understand or ‘know’.

Inviting description - Rather than trying to ‘interpret’ or ‘explain’ clients’ processes phenomenological therapists celebrate the value of *simply describing*. The aim is to stay with the manifest material (rather than interpreting) in active, curious ways, not simply through passive reflecting back. It’s about opening up a client’s descriptions towards them finding some meaning, not imposing our own meanings.

The starting point is usually to ask clients to *describe* their experience: to tell their ‘story’. “Can you describe this experience as it happened?” Some prompts to help return the client to the specific scene may prove helpful: “Put yourself in that place, and look around. What do you see/hear/smell?” Or, “what is happening in your body at this moment as you’re talking?”

Reflections

Existential phenomenology is both very complex (due to the underlying philosophical theory) and very simple as it is primarily about celebrating our shared humanness and vulnerability. Along with other existential phenomenologists, I believe that I just have to be there *with* the client in the here-and-now, and the combined power of an experiential/existential descriptive focus and the relational context is potentially transformational.

What most excites me is the being-with process and the fleeting moments of wonder which come when we open to another. The other’s experience – in its uniqueness and otherness - takes me in and I am in awe. The ensuing relational contact (dialogue) forms the field for self-realisation and growth for both client and therapist.