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Practising Phenomenology - some reflections and considerations

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Abstract

This paper looks at how phenomenology as a research method can be applied to human phenomena particularly in the therapeutic context. It makes connections between the phenomenological method and existing therapeutic practice. Some suggestions are made about the appropriateness of specific verbal and non verbal interventions

Introduction

This is a practical paper intended to draw attention to some of the issues involved in translating philosophical theory into psychotherapeutic practice. Some of what I say, perhaps much of what I say, I suspect will be familiar but I believe there is considerable value in examining and re-examining what we assume to be obvious. Quite often familiarity with terms, particularly jargon words, leads to a false sense of security gained from a less than complete understanding of their meaning.

Psychotherapy can be seen as the practical application of philosophy and philosophy has a similar relationship to therapeutic practice as that which the laws of physics and chemistry have to civil engineering. It is only by the application of theoretical principles in the real world that we discover their value, and it is the extent to which a theory can be modifiable by lived experience that gives it its standing as good theory. An unchangeable theory is a bad theory, it is a dead theory.

Phenomenology is a research method. It is a way of finding out about ourselves and the world we live in through a particular sort of systematic investigation, which means it has a number of stages designed to build in consistency, and transferable reliability. The word phenomenon is from the Greek meaning appearance or that which shows itself.

Phenomenology is therefore a systematic study of appearances and a correlation of these appearances with either structures posited as real objects or with other experiences. It is one of a number of research methods and it can be compared with the Natural Scientific method. This too is a systematic investigation which goes observation - hypothesis - experiment - result - new hypothesis etc. It is based on observation of the various elements in the object field in order to determine causal relationships and

qualities. This is made possible not only by the experimental separation of the observer, (the subject), from the observed, (the object), but also by the assumption of that both are essentially passive or reactive in their defined contexts. (Thinès 1977).

The Oxford English Dictionary defines Science as 'Systematic and formulated knowledge'.

Another research method is Introspectionism. Introspectionism is about the observation by an individual of their own mental activity. It pays little attention to events in the external world, and instead puts the emphasis on subjective experiences in the sense that it places importance on the experience rather than than the experience of. Another way of saying this is that it does put great importance on the context of the experience. It is not particularly systematic, and incidentally is often not introspection in the strict sense at all but retrospection.

The early 19th century principle of Psychologism as a loosely defined research method can be seen as a precursor of Phenomenology in the sense of studying reality by studying our ideas of it .

A word I will be using a lot in this paper is Experience. Again from the OED. 'The action of putting to the test. A tentative procedure; an operation performed in order to ascertain or illustrate some truth; an experiment. The actual observation of facts and events, considered as a source of knowledge. The fact of being consciously the subject of a state or condition, or of being consciously affected by an event. A state of mind or feeling forming part of the inner religious life '

Another word is Know. Also from the OED. 'To hold for true or real with assurance and on(what is held to be) an adequate objective foundation. To know oneself. To have personal experience of something as affecting oneself; to have experienced, met with, felt, or undergone'.

Phenomenology is only a way of finding things out. It is a tool, and we are the intermediate step between the tool and what is made.

The essence of the phenomenological method as applied to psychotherapy is one of practice, of being and doing, of discourse and not of theorising, or thinking-about. It is also a social activity, something we do with other people

Heidegger said that he was only able to understand phenomenology after he did it, after he was able to 'relinquish untested philosophical knowledge' (Heidegger 1972 p.76). A crucial word for us here is 'untested, because he suggests that there is something to be tested.

Stern in his phenomenological infant observations, (Stern 1985) noted that infants, who have little theory, only their present experience to base their observations and conclusions on, do just this. They test their experience in one sense modality with that of another. In this way they

gain not only a sense of personal coherence but a sense of the reliability of the world. Infants are phenomenologists.

The Phenomenological method is in this case like the Natural Scientific method, an essential component of which is the experiment. These however are not thing-experiments, they are experience-experiments.

We should not be afraid of thinking of phenomenology as a scientific method of investigation in the sense that it is rigorous and systematic.

Phenomenology

The word reduction is used to describe the systematic nature of phenomenology. There are three sorts of reduction each with different purposes .

The Phenomenological reduction, is called the Epoché and is a way of removing the layers of interpretation and assumptions that we put between ourselves and the world, in order that we can better see the world for what it actually is, rather than for what we imagine it to be.

The Eidetic Reduction follows and is designed to look past the detail of the thing and to see the process of how I look at the thing.

The Transcendental Reduction follows that and is designed to focus on the source of my consciousness or what has been called elsewhere the 'processing plant' (van Deurzen 1997 p.62).

I will be looking particularly at the first two, the Phenomenological and the Eidetic Reduction as applied to psychotherapy.

But first, Phenomenology. Phenomenology was developed by Husserl as a descriptive investigation of essences. His project had two aims, the first was scientific in that he wanted to bring a rigour to the study of consciousness that was previously absent, and the second was more revolutionary in that he wanted the study of consciousness to be the foundation stone for all scientific enquiry. Subsequently, Heidegger developed phenomenology for a different purpose, that of the study of existence.

Husserl said that by studying the appearance of something, the boundaries of knowledge can be extended in two directions,

Firstly towards the object, to find out about it

Secondly, towards the subject, to find out about the process of looking, - the more I look at things the more I will find out about the me that does the looking.

He felt there was a correspondence between the subjective act and its external referent which made both equally and together the proper subject

of study. We make this correspondence all the time in everyday life with varying degrees of success.

The aim of phenomenology is to increase this success rate.

He distinguished between Natural Everyday Seeing and Phenomenological Seeing. (Levinas 1973). He felt Natural Everyday Seeing is at best blind and at worst obstructs and hides, whereas Phenomenological Seeing is being able to see the things themselves. Natural Everyday Seeing is like the six blindfolded people describing the elephant, each one describing the part he has hold of and making the jump to assuming the rest of the elephant is the same. Not only that but the elephant is always described in terms of something else, not in terms of itself

The 'things themselves' is a phrase used a lot. What does it mean? What exactly is a phenomenon? What is an unmediated unit of experience? What is the nature of the 'evidence' that we take. For Husserl the 'things themselves' were the invariant, essential structures of transcendental consciousness.. Heidegger rejected this and said that the transcendental ego and the stream of consciousness with its experiences were residual metaphysics, they were artefacts of a flawed investigation. For Heidegger the things themselves were mans being-in-the-world

There is a second fundamental question about phenomena. Where are the phenomena? Just as phenomena are never taken as being self-evident, they can also never be located either inside or outside, but both. This is what is known as the phenomenological field and it consists of anything available to present experience

Husserl considered Intuition to be the most reliable source of evidence of all, as it is permanently engaged with reality. It can therefore be used to prevent our understanding from being simply an imaginative creation or delusion which only has only a tenuous relationship to reality. (Macann1993)

Intuitive acts are things like perception, memory, sensation and imagination. Psychoanalysts conceptualise Intuition in terms of unconscious functioning. The Humanistic tradition thinks about it as empathy. Intuition precedes meaning in the sense that meaning is what we do to the things we intuit. Language follows meaning. The sequence is intuition - meaning - language and each step involves a simplification. Something else important about Intuition is that it is not instantaneous, but quite gradual. It is a way of knowing that is not empirical or deductive, it is about gaining a 'sense' of the object.

Levinas commenting on Husserl's Theory of Intuition distinguishes importantly between Intuitive acts and Signifying acts. An Intuitive act is one that reaches its object. This is Intuitive Apprehension. He opposes this

to Signifying Acts which only aim at but do not reach the object. Signifying Apprehension is a short-cut to the object but also a dead-end to the object. It is not so much a difference in degree but a difference in kind. Whereas Intuition actualises the intention, possesses the object, understands, appreciates the object in its fullness, Signification only thinks about the object in a symbolic form i.e. something that stands in place of, in front of, the object. In contrast to Intuition, Signification is characterised by emptiness. In the therapeutic relationship, Signifying Apprehension is characterised by resorting to theoretical and philosophical ideas about the client as a futile substitute for real engagement.

Evidence therefore is anything that can be intuitable, it must be experienceable. By this it means that hearsay, theories about, constructions based on, rumours, superstitions, however interesting or plausible they may seem or however useful they have been in the past cannot be taken as evidence. Returning to the 'things themselves' meant identifying things as they are and without the filter, of any theory whether scientific, philosophical, personal, political, historical, socially or culturally sanctioned or whatever.

The bridge between the thing and the thought-of-the-thing is intentionality. Because of its all pervading presence, it prevents us from establishing a reliable sense of figure and ground which we need to make sense of our experience. This leads us to frequently lose our bearings such that we can imagine we are not doing it when in fact we are doing it in such habitual ways that we either do not notice. We convince ourselves that our fantasies are real. Psychoanalysts conceptualise this phenomenon as transference and counter-transference. A reason I say this is that regardless of the debate about exactly what Freud meant about the relationship between phenomena and theory, for us as phenomenologists we must never forget that the experience came first and the conceptualisation came second. Just because we do not like a particular conceptualisation, we have no right to disregard the experience. To do so is unphenomenological and a substitute for thought.

Intentionality is about the 'creation - destruction - re-creation of meaning' cycle of interpretation that goes on for the most part behind the scenes of awareness (van Deurzen 1997 p.60). It is about testing experience against reality.

Above all it correlates the things that are experienced with the way they are experienced. This is an important distinction between the *what* of the experience called the noema, and the *how* of the experience called the noesis.

These are terms from philosophy. We as psychotherapists already know them as the difference between content and process. The most obvious

difference between them is they use different languages. Content is represented in simple cognitive, conventional language, 'I went shopping'. Process is less easy to grasp. It is close to intentionality in that it pervades and constitutes awareness such that it is difficult to detect or to know its origin. So difficult that the tendency is to reify and externalise it, as in, 'She makes me feel angry'.

Matters are comparatively simple when considering the nature of my experience when for example I encounter something inanimate like a chair. I only have my own content and process to deal with. In relationships, one persons consciousness cannot be regarded as insulated from another's. This is the meaning of intersubjectivity. For a comparison of the concepts of phenomenological concept of Intersubjectivity and the Kleinian concept of Projective Identification see Weaver (1999) Truly mind-boggling complications arise when one intentional consciousness encounters another intentional consciousness, as in psychotherapy.

We have to consider

My usual content, (independent of others) - the kind of things I usually think about

My usual process, (independent of others) - the way I usually think about things

My content, when I'm with you

My process, when I'm with you

Your usual content, (independent of others) - the kind of things you usually think about

Your usual process, (independent of others) - the way you usually think about things

Your content, when you're with me

Your process, when you're with me

And all the permutations of the ways these can co-constitute each other.

R.D.Laing was acutely aware of this complexity in a way that neither Husserl nor Heidegger were, and although he did some work on it (Laing, Phillipson and Lee 1966) and wrote about it in abstract poetic terms (1972) and it was one of his lifetimes projects, he never got round to formalising it. (Mullen 1995)

In Natural Everyday Seeing there is a tendency to simplify this complexity by denying that our interpersonal experience is co-constituted in favour of

objectifying either (1) ourselves, (2) the other person or (3) both. We need to guard against this.

Phenomenology has therefore been used to examine objects, processes, consciousness and also existence. Viewing it as only having one of these strands or viewing them as being competing or mutually exclusive causes unnecessary problems borne out of a desire for ideological and philosophical neatness.

In spite of this it is possible to talk about the Phenomenological Method with a reasonable degree of authority.

The Phenomenological Method

Since phenomenology is systematic it follows that there are characteristic actions or skills associated with it. If these are not adhered to what results is an individualistic unsystematic approach guaranteed only to produce rather idiosyncratic and unreliable results which give rise to beliefs about what is important about therapy which have the same knowledge status as superstitions. Perhaps this is why there are so many theoretical perspectives.

I will be describing some of these skills as I go on. There are two main parts to the application of the Phenomenological research method.

The whole of the first part, as said, is known as The Rule of Epoché. (Spinelli 1989) It is characteristically more passive, involves Intuition and has three sub-stages. It is variously called a rule, a stage, a step, or a principle. I prefer however to think of it as an aim, since it is a general statement of intent and can actually never be achieved.

But this should not stop us trying.

Calling them stages or steps implies a fixed sequence or order. This is not only an unrealistic but also a mechanistic way of considering a dynamic process. They are best considered to be done simultaneously.

The second element is more active and specifies what and how something is to be focussed on and is sometimes called Verification. (Ihde 1986). This has a more hermeneutic function.

Before I talk about the sub-steps I want to make some general points about Epoché.

Beginning in their training, therapists are encouraged to reflect on their experiences with the expectation that having identified their assumptions they will somehow see more clearly and be better therapists.

However there is often a belief that just being cognitively aware of an assumption is all that needs to be done and having done it, it somehow magically stops it from contaminating the rest of the experience. As if it gets put into a sort of psychic dustbin. This too reduces the interaction to a

mechanistic one in which everything that makes the therapist a human being, is denied.

The first flaw in this is the assumption that we can ever be fully aware of our assumptions. It is an omnipotent arrogance to say 'I know all there is to know about myself'

The next is that as long as the assumptions are kept out of the way unexamined they will find a way of coming back in ways we are unaware of, most likely as process. Not examining what they are doing there, what they mean to us, how they got there etc. is a denial and an evasion of our responsibility. We need these assumptions, not just to make sense of the world but to remind ourselves how we usually make sense of the world. Our assumptions inform and area creation of our being. We are our assumptions. Our clients also need us to have these assumptions, but only if we know what to do with them.

The third flaw is the belief that it is a once and for all process. Life is continuous, so reflecting on our evolving assumptions should also be continuous.

There are many different sorts of assumptions, which interlock in various ways. When they combine, the belief is that much stronger and therefore more resistant to examination.

An example of a philosophical assumption is 'Awareness of personal mortality is a prime motivating force in peoples lives'.

An example of a professional assumption is 'because I'm an Existentialist I have nothing to learn from any other therapeutic perspective'..

An emotional assumption combined with a philosophical assumption is 'Envy is bad (emotional) and because Melanie Klein talked a lot about it a lot, I'm not going to (philosophical)'..

The private, the philosophical, and the relational can coincide as in 'corporal punishment is good for people, (philosophical) it never did me any harm (private), that's why I'm doing it to you' (relational). and so on

All these may possibly be so but that is not the point. The point is that the conclusions are defined by the assumptions. A result of assumptions being unexamined is that what is taken to be evidence will bear an uncanny resemblance to the assumptions. This can lead to a self-reinforcing cycle of delusion in which one plants the evidence, and then discovers it as if for the first time and maintains that it 'proves' the theory. Most case studies are like this.

In the Natural Sciences it is called fixing the evidence. An example of this is when the tobacco industry commissions research into the effect of smoking you know pretty well what sort of results they will come up with.

In the legal field this sort of behaviour is called fraud and perjury.

Natural Scientists are smart enough to know that their theories can never be proved, they can only be disproved. (Popper 1959)

Psychotherapists find it easy to criticise other therapeutic perspectives for such practices but in phenomenology we need to find a much stronger light to shine on this than just relying on simple personal judgment, on introspectionism. We need to find a way to test our work.

Relating it directly to the therapeutic relationship, a danger of the therapists unexamined assumptions is that the client will feel that the therapists assumptions are fact, with the rule being 'you learn my assumptions and I will pronounce you cured'.

This is even more dangerous for the two people if there is some superficial coherence between them, for example if a student on an Existential course goes to see an Existential therapist.

As therapists every intervention of yours, and this includes silence, expresses basic assumptions about you, your relationship with your client or both

The therapist must hold himself in a state of Unknowing in order to help the client to do the same. Both memory i.e. attachment to the past and previously learnt theories and desire i.e. attachment to the future will hinder this. The psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion says (1989), '... it took me a very long time to become convinced of the need to denude myself of memory and desire, and even longer still before I appreciated the vicious effect on observation that was exerted by my need to understand'.(p.15)

Closed questions like 'Have you thought of getting another job', or 'Are you going to get a divorce', not only close down thinking but say more about the therapists unexamined assumptions than the clients.

A therapist cannot expect to have a sufficiently clear awareness of another persons assumptions unless they are aware of their own. This is not just a good idea. Clients tell us how valuable this is when they say how useful it is to talk to someone who is not telling them what they ought to be thinking,feeling or doing, who is separate from the situation they are describing, who does not have an axe to grind.

How do you spot your own assumptions working? A start is three simple questions you can ask yourselves about your work with particular clients. They are

What I want for my client?

If I was to give my client some advice right now, what might it be?

Do I feel a different way towards this client rather than towards that client?

And what is this about?

In applying the first part, of the Phenomenological research method,. The Rule of Epoché, to the therapeutic setting, the therapist needs to do five things

1. Identify their assumptions
2. Bracket them
3. Remember them
4. Understand them
5. Use them in the relationship

And if this is done sufficiently rigorously the client will be enabled to do four things

1. Identify their assumptions
2. Clarify them
3. Understand them
4. Use them in their life

Attention

The first of the sub steps is Attention. When encountering anything one turns ones attention onto it. Immediately, one starts to interpret it in terms of encounters with similar things in the past. This is a jump into Natural Everyday Seeing. What we need to do is just to attend, to allow our intuition to operate, allow ourselves to accommodate possibility rather than actuality

On a skills level, we need to be silent. The more we are freed up from having to talk the more we can listen. Our awareness is like a light we shine on things in order to apprehend them. This is not such a bad analogy at all because we know that if we shine a very bright light on something not only does the object appear two-dimensional instead of three-dimensional, but a consequence of this is that it throws no shadows, to use a Jungian term.

Nothing ever just has a front.

If we insist that it does only have a front, that what meets our first glance is literally all there is, we will not see it in its dynamic multidimensionality. We need to find a way of throwing just enough light in order to see, but not so much that we inhibit, flatten and freeze bearing in mind all the time that we are, despite our best efforts, influencing the object.

By being phenomenological we might just find out about the nature of this influence.

A good description of the kind of attention required I borrow from psychoanalysis. It talks about the primary tasks of the therapist and the

client being similar and complementary. Freud called this the Basic Rule. The task of the therapist is to listen to the client with 'evenly suspended attention', also known as 'evenly hovering attention' or 'unfocussed listening' in order to 'avoid reflection and construction of conscious expectation'. The way he conceptualised it was 'to catch the drift of the patients unconscious with his unconscious' (Freud 1923 quoted in Rayner 1991 p179). He is not just listening to the story though, he is also listening to himself listening to the story, and trying to put aside while being aware of them, whatever associations he is having. Phenomenologically what he is talking about is applying the first step of Epoché, about gaining a 'sense' of the object, that only comes when we use our intuition rather than our judgmental faculties. He was of course familiar with the work of Husserl and Brentano.

Our ability to attend is correlated with our ability to live with between creative uncertainty - the downside of which is muddle, mystery and vagueness and the need for some safe footholds, the downside of which is unthinking arrogant lazy dogmatism. (Bateman A. and Holmes J. 1995 p16)

This has also been described as unknowing (Parsons 1984, 1986. Casement 1985. Spinelli 1997.)

Description

The second of the sub-steps is The Rule of Description.

On first glance this looks easy. All you have to do is describe, you do not have to explain, attribute causation, justify, problem solve, pretend you know more than you do, analyse, or anything like that, just describe what you 'see', the appearance.

There is an immediate paradox here, that all descriptions are based on theories of how to make descriptions. The two are functionally inseparable. It is difficult to imagine a pint of milk independently of a milk bottle and a milk bottle with no milk ceases to have meaning as a milk bottle. The way of making descriptions defines the type of descriptions which can be made. The container (the way of making) and the contained (what is made) co-constitute each other.

Because of the intentional nature of consciousness it is impossible to make a description of my own or another's behaviour as it impinges on my consciousness, without recourse to assumptions such as freedom, or separateness.

In a Phenomenological Analysis there is no place for an explanation of facts, only a description of them. An explanation is any sort of theory which attempts to give an account of the facts in terms other than

themselves. Be very wary of using terms, especially metaphors, your client has not yet used. Metaphors are very seductive and only superficially convincing. . The difficulty is always knowing at what point the metaphor has outlived its usefulness and begins to distort and distract.

As a general rule the temptation for the therapist to explain is proportional to the anxiety the therapist is feeling. In other words , on reflection, explanation is invariably given to relieve the therapists anxiety, not the clients. Consequently it usually increases the clients anxiety. Reassurance is never reassuring. Explanation is both unnecessary and distancing. If the Givens are so given, then they do not need to be given.

The next problem is determining the range of what is available for description. What is the time scale available for valid description, the last second, the last five seconds, the last five minutes, the last five sessions or what. Clearly, like many other things, it depends. As a general rule of thumb, the further away from the present moment you go, into the past or the future the greater the risk there is that you will hi-jack the conversation. Risks being what they are though, an observation about a general trend carefully placed and timed will not necessarily be unphenomenological if it is related to present lived experience.

Clearly the words that a person uses can be available for descriptive analysis and these are often the most obvious things available. But to regard verbal cues as being the sole or even the most important body of available evidence is a throwback to Behaviourism.

It must be remembered that

We cannot assume that what someone says is a complete, accurate or literal description of their experience,

We cannot assume that if a client says 'yes' they agree with and think the same way as us.

We cannot assume that the person knows what words to use

We cannot assume that the person wants to tell you what they are even if they know them.

We cannot assume that the experience is either currently or eventually verbalisable.

To hold to any of these assumptions drastically reduces our view of the world. To concentrate only on what is verbally represented is to put too great an emphasis on the reliability of language. It can be argued that verbal cues are only obvious to us because we live in a verbal culture and psychotherapy is a symptom of this culture. We are much more than just

the words we use. Words are like focussed beams of light, they often darken far more than they shed light on.

When thinking about what to describe perhaps more important than what we talk about though, is the way we talk about it, the process, because it is this that has the most direct evidence of our intentional nature.

Simply because it is more difficult to grasp we need to develop our awareness of it. Yet again psychoanalysis got there first when it talks about transferential phenomena and the way ones being is influenced by the presence of another.

A therapist cannot expect to have a sufficiently clear awareness of another persons process unless they have one of their own.

The dimension of human experience that has the most direct connection with our intentional nature is the emotional dimension. Emotions are what connect us and locate us within our existence .

They are the ebb and flow of human experience with currents, undercurrents and cross currents. We need to refine our awareness of emotions so that we can ‘hear’ the harmonics. to use a musical metaphor. They are like the weather, and there is never no weather

Emotions are the connection between being and doing. The most important thing to note about being and doing is not the difference but the similarity. Not the beginning of the words but the end of the words. The ‘- ing’. They are both about dynamic continuity, the impossibility of fixedness in time and space and the impossibility of certainty.

They are not things we have, they are things we are.

This is why description needs to focus primarily on emotional experience, rather than mediated intellectual or cognitive experience because an acknowledgment of ones emotions will lead to a fuller understanding of ones nature, and into the limitations one imposes on oneself, than any explanation will.

A useful question for a therapist is, To what extent do I or my clients have access to the full range of emotions (whatever that is)?

The most useful question to start a descriptive analysis is not ‘Why’, because this requests a distancing from present experience by attempting to establish causal links and is in any case only answerable with ‘Because...’ , which prompts yet another Why question. but the questions What, which simply requests further description

As in

1. How do you mean?
2. What’s that like?
3. Can you give me an example?

Horizontalisation

The third of the sub-steps is The Rule of Horizontalisation. Also called the Rule of Equalisation or Equal Value.

On many occasions in therapy we are on the edge of the known world, the client knows no more than they are telling us. And we do not know what any of it means. This is why we have to refrain from placing comparative values on the various parts of the clients narrative and process.

In applying the rule of Horizontalisation we need to consider each part of the content, and of the process, to be of equal importance. Moreover our ability to identify parts of the story and the experience will inevitably be limited by our own life experience and as I said our ability to convince ourselves that particular ways of seeing things are absolute fact is enormous. It goes without saying that our success at horizontalising is dependent on our ability to identify and deal with our assumptions. Or to put it the other way round if we catch ourselves thinking about our clients in particular ways, it gives a clue that we are not horizontalising well enough. This is in terms of content but it is not always this obvious.

We should also be asking ourselves things like- In what way am I influencing my clients such they never talk about sex, or envy, or whatever, which I also happen to not like talking about, or they always talk about creativity or wholeness, which I do like talking about ?

We need to beware of the obvious.

However, as long as one is describing the elements of the narrative if only to oneself, sooner or later certain elements will appear to be more in evidence than other.

Verification

The second level in the application of the Phenomenological research method to psychotherapy is more active and is sometimes called Verification (Ihde 1986).

The first level activities can be extremely powerful and on some occasions but not all, rekindle genuine philosophical perplexity and personal questioning, but on other occasions a descriptive analysis is not enough. it can lead to a morbid going round in circles when almost literally, nothing happens. You are both busy finding out things you already know. Our clients deserve something better for their money and we both have better things to do with our time. A being-with our clients that involves Verification in a way sensitive to their phenomenological field is almost a definition of effective therapy.

In a sense the first level activities function negatively in that they exclude certain conventional therapeutic skills. Verification gives a direction to what to do with all the impressions and questions accumulated during epoché, with the elements that appear to be more in evidence than others.

The overall aim of Verification in therapy is to explore meanings, both within the narrative, within the process, and within the relationship between the therapist and the client and to make links between them. It is about wondering about how all the elements are correlated. About how content and process are interlinked.

It is also a much more rigorous examination of the way intentionality is operating in order to give meaning.

Although our overall role as phenomenological therapists is to question the assumptions embedded in the content and the process, by questioning I do not mean in a way that is characterised by an over-zealous TV political journalist, but by an attitude of questioning. It is not a questioning-of, but a questioning-with.

The first part of the rule of Verification can be stated as 'to seek out structural or invariant features of the phenomena' (Ihde 1986 p.39). Translated, this means that we will be wondering what bits are similar to what other bits and in what ways, wondering how the jigsaw fits together, for to fit together it must, in some way.

We need therefore to be looking out for common elements in the content and process to wonder about. There are three dangers here

(1) the common elements must of course belong together by virtue of themselves, and not by virtue of an unexamined assumption of ours about how jigsaws should fit together

(2) it is extremely difficult to judge at what point enough evidence has been gathered to justify breaking the rule of Horizontalisation and to select a particular item to focus on. This is something that has to be learnt usually through trial and error. Fortunately our clients are usually very patient with our incompetence and clear with their feedback, if we are ready to hear it. We will only know how useful something by the effect it has, when it is tested

(3) Not acknowledging that some elements are more in evidence than others is doing a disservice to yourself and your clients. A reluctance to rely on the authority of your own experience can lead to an idealisation of ignorance. This is the opposite of unknowing, when we are determined not to know. Hiding behind ignorance can be as damaging as hiding behind theory.

Two rules of thumbs to go on are

- If the same issue has been mentioned three times it is worth referring to. You may not hear it again, the client may give up mentioning it.
- If something clearly has undescribed emotional tone attached to it may be worth picking out for further examination

Characteristic statements or directions of Verification are

Has this ever happened before?

How is this leading you to what you say you want

Verification can be formalised in three sub-steps (Berguno 1998).

The first step is to present the findings as items for discussion.

This leads to the second stage which is a discussion that re-examines assumptions hidden within both the therapists and the clients descriptions.

And this discussion leads in a dialectical fashion to a preliminary working consensus about the issue under discussion and its consequent redescription.

This sequence, presentation - discussion - redescription is endlessly repeated and is the essence of therapeutic dialogue.

It is also in this part of the phenomenological investigation that we can be more actively challenging and interpretative. We are of course always interpreting in the sense that we are always making sense of but the duty of a phenomenological therapist is to make sure that interpretations are made within the framework of the phenomenological field rather than that of a theory or the therapists supervisor. or the therapists preoccupations.

The therapeutic tradition which has said the most about the place of interpretation is the psychoanalytic tradition. Bollas (1987 p236) describes the function of an interpretation as helping the client to 'receive news from the self'. He is using the word self in a colloquial sense. The contemporary object relations psychoanalytic tradition advocates a reduction in the analysts omniscience and omnipotence (Rayner 1991) and from this point of view all formal interpretations are inappropriate. Those said before the client has thought of them are premature, those said after the client has made them are redundant, and those said at the same time are unnecessary. The therapist will use a combination of their attunement to the client and their knowledge of the client to phrase their interpretations. Winnicott (1991) sees interpretations primarily as ways of thinking about the work in progress and since the work is collaborative both are participants in interpretative thinking. The work itself is seen as being interpretative. He says that interpretations when made, should be kept as short and simple as

possible as long interpretations can be confusing and also hinder the development of the clients self analytic capacity. This tradition is carried on by Casement (1985,1990) among others who warns against certainty and dogma in interpretation . He says (1985 p.218) 'What may then develop is more a matter of telling the (client) than of finding out with the (client). The contrast here is between work which becomes dogmatic and that which draws on the clients own creativity'. There is a danger in going too far in the opposite direction too, because what can happen then is that over tentativeness can degenerate into muddle and vagueness. In the ebb and flow of the interaction the therapist needs to cultivate a spirit of creative uncertainty. In this context silence itself can have a powerful interpretative value, since it requests the client to think about and stay with their thoughts.

Laing (1965) is referring to this when talks about the attitude the therapist needs to have towards the client. He says that relational closeness of love and non-exploitative intimacy is necessary for a client to experience their being. Moreover that there is no point trying to pretend more concern than one has. He says 'The motives and thus the being of the therapist need to be clear because the more the therapists-motives for wanting to help are translated into an ability just to 'let him be, the more hope there can be'. (p.45).

Conversely if the therapist wishes for the client to be a particular way or to do a particular thing the less hope there will be

An interpretation is a powerful way of compressing an enormous amount of information into a few words and as such has two functions, to bring something to the notice of the client and also to consolidate the work being done.

There are three qualities that a successful interpretation must have

It must be tentative, the client must be able to dispute it and consider it rather than to feel obligated to swallow it whole.

It must make a connection between a trigger event and its consequences or make sense of the connection between the past and the future. Malans two triangles of psychoanalytic interpretation conform to this model (Malan 1979). Remember there is nothing intrinsically unphenomenological about the past or the future as long as we adhere to the basic phenomenological principle of staying with present experience. Therefore the focus has to be on the past or future-as-currently-lived, rather than on the past-as-it-was, or the future-as-it will inevitably be.

Above all it must enhance meaning and deepen engagement with the issues at hand, not oversimplify or distance.

Conclusion

We are now in a position to distinguish between the three different research methods of Phenomenology, Introspectionism, and Natural Science

In Phenomenology there is a initial movement outwards to understand the world in order that the person can understand themselves. In this way there is no functional distinction between the objective and subjective worlds since they are both elements of the phenomenological field which acknowledges the correlation of different subjectivities and objectivities.

In Introspectionism there is a distinction between the objective and subjective worlds but there is sole emphasis on the primacy of subjective experience and little correlation either with other subjectivities or with objective reality

In Natural Science too there is a distinction between the subjective and objective experience but there is sole emphasis on the value of objective evaluation.

With respect to psychotherapy theories the Humanistic perspective while having some phenomenological credentials has a tendency towards Introspectionism.

Psychoanalysis in the first half of the last century was in the curious position of having to combine impeccable phenomenological foundations with the Natural Scientific perspective. Needless to say it did this rather uneasily, but in the last 25 years has done much to loosen the grip of the Natural Scientific viewpoint, for example in the work of Schaffer (1976,1981), Spence (1982), Symington (1990,1993,1996) and Lomas (1968,1987,1994).

The Cognitive Behavioural tradition, by contrast has a tendency to rely on the Natural Scientific method and the authority of the therapist.

The Existential psychotherapy tradition is so far in a very early stage of development in the U.K. but is beginning to show some of the characteristics of Existential philosophy, in that it appears to be more of a precarious unity of opposites (Grieder 1991) than as a generally agreed set of principles. This is hardly surprising because of having to incorporate the influences of the Humanistic, the Psychoanalytic and the Cognitive Behavioural traditions as well as that of Existential Philosophy.

As long as the principles of phenomenology are adhered to with honesty and rigour the relationship between what stands for Existential Therapy and Phenomenology will develop such that the unphenomenological influences of which there are many, will drop away.

There is of course an assumption running all the way through this paper that being phenomenological with clients is good and helpful they will feel

better because of it. The evidence for this is largely anecdotal and derived introspectively and is therefore quite suspect. Although there is some outcome research more needs to be done into the effects of the application of phenomenology to the therapeutic situation and also on what modifications if any need to be made and under what circumstances.

Phenomenology can only be a social activity dedicated to discovering the depth and breadth of the meanings we construct in relation with other people.

The future is not in Phenomenology but in the way we do Phenomenology with each other.

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