Psychotherapy Guidebook

Phenomenological Psychotherapy

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DEFINITION

Phenomenological Psychotherapy is a treatment approach developed by Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty. It is based on their understanding that (1) human beings organize their experiences and give meaning to them through particular conscious attention and through focus upon aspects of the world; (2) behavior is the result of choices grounded in personal experience; and (3) the therapist can assist clients and patients in clarifying and bringing to awareness the patterns which are used to interpret their life experiences and make them meaningful. Phenomenological Psychotherapy is not a body of systematized techniques. It is a basic approach to clients and patients, and within this approach techniques can be used that have been developed in various therapeutic systems.

HISTORY

The historical roots of phenomenological psychology lie in the "act" psychologies which were developed in Germany in the late nineteenth century. The "act" psychologies studied mainly human consciousness (an

interest which was later abandoned by American behaviorism) and postulated that consciousness consists of the appearance of objects — appearance which results when one "acts" or focuses attention on particular outer or inner objects. The "act" psychologies were opposed to the generally accepted associationist theory which held that consciousness is the mere accumulation of sensory experiences linked by mental laws of association. Thus, "act" psychology proposed that consciousness is constructed by a person's specific active attention, not through the passive reception of sensory input. In short, people attend to and act on the world so as to create meaning and organization.

Two major programs refined and developed the study of consciousness as proposed by "act" psychology: Gestalt psychology, as practiced by Wertheimer and Koffka, and phenomenological psychology, founded by Husserl (1895–1938). While Gestalt psychology concentrated on perceptual patterns of organization, phenomenological psychology emphasized the study of the ways in which consciousness organizes itself to produce the meaning-laden experiential world in which we exist and through which we know ourselves, others, and our physical environment. Husserl's major contribution was the development of a special method for studying these processes of consciousness. He believed that the methods used by science to study objects in the physical-temporal world were inappropriate for studying human experience, and his method employed disciplined intellectual exercises in

order to establish a standpoint for observing one's own conscious activity. One of the most significant contributions made through the use of this method is a description of the human experience of time. Husserl found that conscious time is experienced as a merging of anticipations of the future and the fading of the immediately previous experiences, not as a continuous flow of present moments.

Although Husserl believed that his method allowed consciousness to be viewed from a perspective which transcends one's personal history, the most significant developers of phenomenological psychology after him — Heidegger (1962), Sartre (1956), and Merleau-Ponty (1962) — believed that one could not step outside of one's own existence to study consciousness. They maintained that we remain situated as historical and bodily beings even as we study ourselves. They retained Husserl's focus on consciousness and the need for phenomenological-type methods for studying human existence, but they emphasized that consciousness itself is shaped by givens of human existence. Because of their emphasis on the human situation as the base on which consciousness organizes itself and its objects, their work is referred to as existential phenomenology to distinguish it from the "pure" phenomenology of Husserl. Most of the significant psychotherapy contributions to develop out of phenomenology have come from followers of this group — for example, Binswanger's (1963) studies of schizophrenia and love, Boss's (1957) study of dreams, Minkowski's (1970) work on time

consciousness, and Strauss's (1963) work on sense experience.

More recently, there has been a growing emphasis within phenomenological psychology on the role of culture in shaping the organizational patterns and meaning-giving structures of consciousness. Studies concerned with language and speech, cultural values, social and economic systems, and historical settings have provided insights into the means by which consciousness interprets and forms its experiences. Examples of this recent work are Ricoeur's (1970) analysis of Freud's focus on the archaic, Ricoeur's (1967) exploration of the cultural symbols of evil, and Gadamer's (1975) investigation of human existence as grounded in interpretation. The term applied to this kind of work is hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenology.

Although phenomenology originated in Europe and remains primarily a European phenomenon, it has had significant impact in the United States. The translation of texts made the work of the European writers accessible to American psychotherapists as early as the 1930s, and there has even been some emigration of phenomenologists to America — for example, Alfred Schutz (1973). Major interest was also aroused by the translations of existential-phenomenological texts which were published in Existence by May and his associates in 1958.

An American psychotherapy centered in the experience of the client was developed by Rogers during the 1950s. His work — along with the work of others more specifically oriented to phenomenology, such as Snygg and Combs (1949) and Gendlin (1962) — brought the attention of American psychologists to the study of consciousness, and this American development paralleled the basic approach to therapy which was then being developed by the European phenomenologists. The American version, however, grew out of the practice of therapy as an alternative to psychoanalysis and behaviorism, and it was not the result of philosophical awareness as was typically the case in Europe.

Currently, the basic approach of phenomenology — a focus on the created experience of the client rather than on underlying unconscious forces or on behavior without consciousness — is being integrated into the client-oriented or humanistic American therapies by providing a philosophical foundation. The impact of the European writers on American psychotherapists is increasingly evident in the content and citations of American research articles, in the formation of several American journals devoted to phenomenological psychology, and in the development of doctoral programs in psychology — at Duquesne University, at the University of Dallas, and at the Humanistic Psychology Institute — which emphasize phenomenological psychology.

TECHNIQUES

Phenomenological Psychotherapy does not provide clearly delineated techniques for working with clients. It does not have any equivalent of the transference of Psychoanalysis, the anxiety hierarchies of Behavioral Modification, or the reflective listening of Client-Centered Therapy. Nevertheless, the general phenomenological understandings do imply ways of practicing psychotherapy.

Therapists and clients (patients) face each other as responsible persons who have come together to engage in dialogue in order to bring about the clarification of experiences and to uncover the structures of meaning through which they are interpreting the events of their lives. The therapist is equipped with general understandings of the operations of consciousness which have been gained through study and training in phenomenological psychology. Using these understandings as a base, the therapist focuses the therapeutic dialogue so that the basic structures through which the client's world is given meaning come into focus. By exploring the areas of the client's experience of his/her bodily location as well as the spatial distance between aspects of the self and between others and the environment, by exploring his/her experience of participation in time, and by exploring the experience of the meaning patterns used for interpreting other people, the therapist and the client — come to greater awareness of the general ways in which the person

exists in the world. This awareness provides a phenomenologically based diagnostic which identifies the particular areas of constricted meaning which can then be explored in greater depth. The purpose of the exploration, in sum, is to provide the client with a greater repertoire of meanings so that his/her sensitivity to the differing aspects of self, others, and the environment can be increased.

The interaction between the client and the therapist is centered in the conscious experiences of each other. As they share and explore alternative possible interpretations of each other, the client's experience becomes fuller. The archaic and unconscious aspects of existence are acknowledged in the therapy, but the focus remains in the telic or purposive dimensions that are open to the client. The client is understood to be a creative subject, capable of solving problems and making decisions that will allow for a fuller, less restricted experience and, on the basis of this experience, capable of making choices and acting to affect and change the world. The therapist helps the client to identify and to clarify the decision points and meaningfulness of the possible choices. The emergence of clear and precise understanding provides the client with a greater power for decision and enactment than was previously the case when the client's experience was delimited by restrictive meaning patterns or when the experience was confusing because it did not offer a clearly focused view.

APPLICATIONS

The primary application of Phenomenological Psychotherapy has been in the development of a deeper and fuller understanding of the lived experiences which clients and patients have. The understanding of another's experience is an important — perhaps the most important — tool that therapists bring to their work with clients. By being sensitive to and appreciating the client's particular way of experiencing the world, the therapist can come closer to understanding the world from the client's perspective. One example of this major application of phenomenological psychology is Minkowski's (1970) work in uncovering the changes in one's experience of time during an episode of depression. During a period of depression, the experience of time changes so that there is no propulsion to the future. The future becomes blocked off, and there is no openness to new and different possibilities. Instead, one experiences a future which merely holds a closed repetition of the past. Another example is Binswanger's (1963) careful analysis of five cases of schizophrenia, which has opened the way for a deeper appreciation of the constricted meaning structures available within a schizophrenia-type existence.

A second significant application of phenomenological psychology is the alternative approach to diagnosis which it provides. Instead of categorizing clients according to their various symptoms, phenomenological diagnosis

concentrates on the ways in which the clients organize their experiences (Keen, 1975). This alternative offers a more meaningful and more useful system of treating and understanding mental illness than the present symptom-based system.

Phenomenological Psychotherapy has been used in working with people whose experiences are organized in a neurotic way or in a severely psychotic manner. It has also been used to help people making life decisions, giving them assistance in identifying and clarifying their meaning patterns. Its primary and most important application, however, derives from the therapist's awareness of the client's various approaches to transforming his/her experience into an ordered and meaningful system.