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Phenomenology and Depth in Existential Psychotherapy

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Abstract

All psychotherapies try to approach what is essential for alleviating patient suffering. In humanistic psychotherapies such as person-centered, Gestalt, and existential therapy, the focus is typically centered on the *person*, the essence of the human being. The person, however, as that which is free in human beings, cannot be fixed or measured. This raises a difficult question: How do we gain systematic access to this "person" when he or she cannot be grasped concretely? Drawing on Existential Analysis, the authors describe a phenomenological approach as possibly the most suitable method for this therapeutic task, because it is pervaded by an attitude of allowing the other to be free and a respect for the uniqueness of the person. In this approach, what is essential is drawn from the depth of the person, simultaneously involving the depth of the therapist, while bracketing foreign interpretations and theories. This article describes this method for accessing personal depth in psychotherapy via an existential-phenomenological perspective.

Keywords

phenomenology, depth, existential therapy, humanistic psychotherapy, freedom, essence, Heidegger, Husserl

A central concern in humanistic psychotherapy turns around the question of how we can approach the *person* adequately (Rogers, 1961). The person is

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purely subjective, and cannot be determined or generalized, but only encountered (Frankl, 1959). In his or her uniqueness and singularity, the person transcends all explanation and is ultimately ungraspable (Jaspers, 1971). To bring the essence, the personhood of human beings into view, or to sense what is essential in a given situation, a phenomenological approach (Heidegger, 1975; Husserl, 1913/1950; Längle, 2003) is required. This approach consists of a systematic pursuit of the person's freedom, while maintaining an attitude of openness. With the help of phenomenology, we aim to perceive the other in their essence, that is, as they truly are in and of themselves in their world (Heidegger, 1927/1967; Husserl, 1913/1950).

The means of phenomenological perception is the subjective, intimate depth of the observer, with his or her human capacity for *sensing*. What is essential can only be found through sensing and not by measuring; to view the distinctive and unique characteristic of the essence of the other, we necessarily draw on our own essence (Buber, 1923/1970). The person, that which is authentic and original in human beings, withdraws from explanations—it requires *understanding* (Dilthey, 1910/1992). We understand when we can see and feel what moves human beings fundamentally in their experiences and actions (Längle, 2016). What moves a human being is always a subjectively felt *value*. Such values account for why human beings act as they do, and so understanding turns around grasping the subjective experience of values. The phenomenological approach offers access to this subjectivity.

What Is Phenomenology?

Phenomenology is an attitude of perception that does not focus on facts and "objective" data but rather on that which appears subjectively to human beings (in Greek, *phainomai* means "appearing"). Phenomenology emerged as a philosophical movement primarily developed by Edmund Husserl (1913/1950). Martin Heidegger's (1927/1967) further development of phenomenology is of particular importance for humanistic psychology and psychotherapy because of its emphasis on *Dasein* (Heidegger's term to describe the being of humans or their "being-in-the-world"). Phenomenological discoveries are not derived from preexisting theories but are gained through immediate, personally felt forms of appearance. Phenomenology aims toward what is individual and unique, and thereby serves as the counterpoint to the natural science approach, which concerns itself with the discovery of generalities and regularities.

With regard to the therapeutic situation, this means that the essence of the client or patient always shines through the ways in which the client appears

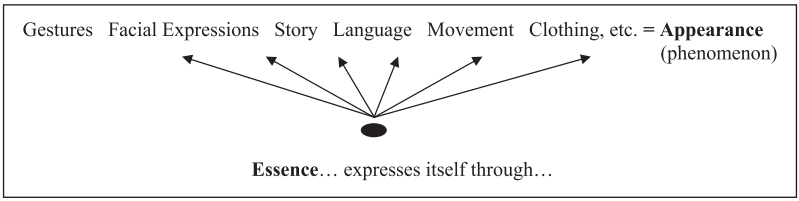

Figure 1. The essence (depth) is expressed through multiple forms of appearance (on the surface).

to the therapist, in bodily and verbal expression, personal narrative, and physical appearance (Figure 1).

Phenomenology consequently has the aim of grasping the essential, and is therefore described by Husserl (1913/1950) as the *view of the essences* (*Wesensschau*). It is a methodology and an attitude dedicated to the exploration of *phenomena*, that is, to what *reveals itself by itself to the observer.* Phenomenology means seeing human beings in their specialness and uniqueness, seeing their exceptionality. The view is simultaneously directed both toward the superficial appearance, and the depth sensed by the observer.

The Focus of Attention

If phenomenology is an adequate means of meeting the person, then it would be surprising if it remained confined only to the realm of philosophical and scientific endeavors. If there was no phenomenological attitude occurring outside of science, we would not be able to really encounter each other in ordinary life, to see each other, or even love each other (Scheler, 1970). The capacity for phenomenological perception is given innately to all human beings, and can be regarded as a fundamental and essential capacity of the person.

Within the practice of humanistic psychotherapy, however, we cannot simply leave it up to chance whether the therapist actually adopts such a phenomenological attitude. It is necessary for the therapist to be able to direct the focus of attention in order to do justice to the client in the relatively short therapeutic hour. This specific manner of seeing, this phenomenological *depth perception*, is focused on multiple aspects, including the unique, the singular, the distinct; the therapist's actual felt experience (subjective impression); the experience in the here and now; the synthesis of the parts into a whole; and the dialogical continuation of the phenomenological process.

The essence of the observed becomes visible to the therapist by allowing the observed to act upon the other's *inner self*, on the person or essence of the

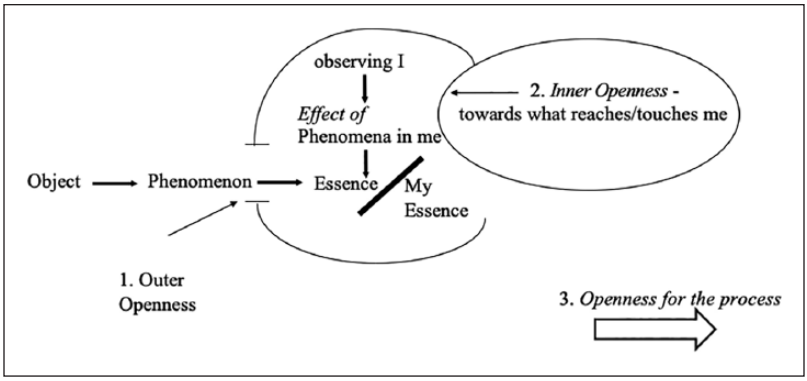

Figure 2. The phenomenological process: How the object, as a phenomenon, reaches the essence of the observer, who then looks at how he or she is moved by the object. This requires an openness toward the outside, the inside, the future (ongoing process).

observer (see Figure 2). This generates an *im-pression* on the observer: It mirrors the object on the "screen" of the observer's own essence. Subsequently, the conscious "I" observes this *im-pression*—the *depth* (the essence) of the other (of the observed) is revealed through the depth (essence) of the observer. For example, a therapist who is touched in the moment by the loss of a grieving patient or client, may sense the depth and meaning of her suffering through this intuitive sensing, although it was not explicitly communicated through the spoken narrative—namely, that with the death of the father she lost not only a caring and supportive person, but ultimately her (unconscious) hope for prolonging a wonderful childhood that she has obviously not yet outgrown.

The Generative Field

If we step into dialogue with another human being in a phenomenological attitude, a kind of interpersonal field is created, an in-between, a *generative field* (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012). This interpersonal field can be described as *generative* because it has the potential to reveal what is essential. As the science of appearances (*phenomena*), the declared aim of *phenomeno-logy* is to allow the things to appear and impress themselves upon the viewer, without the requirement to see what the objective is. What is "objective" is now seen through the lens of subjectivity. Through such an open and attentive attitude, a common, connecting together is established, which temporarily

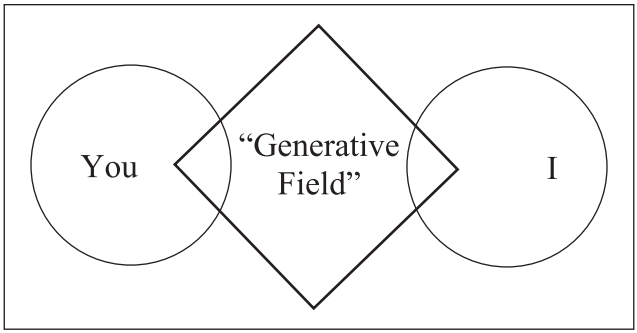

Figure 3. A generative field is created through the encounter in the open and turned-toward phenomenological attitude, in which the partners experience an "us" unity.

dissolves the subject–object relationship and creates an experienced *us* (Figure 3).

In this generative field something *new* is created that neither the one nor the other partner could have generated on their own. The space, which is represented by the generative field, invites the person to step in and to show themselves, so that they can be recognized or understood. The interaction of these forces creates a *vibrational pattern* (e.g., not unlike what happens when one plucks the string of a violin in the presence of another violin) that reveals characteristics of the participants and leads to recognitions of each other and of oneself through each other. In this way, the mutual engagement with one another generates new insights and realizations.

Applied Phenomenology

Phenomenology is primarily an *attitude*, a counterpoint to the primacy of method or technique in the natural sciences. Phenomenology attempts to recognize the essential within a phenomenon, without distorting the view through premade methodological or conceptual filters. Vetter (1989) notes that, "in lieu of the primacy of method before the phenomenon we have the attempt to allow the phenomenon to speak for itself through its intrinsic form" (p. 16). This "phenomenological depth perception" becomes, in practice, a method that has a clear framework and steps. Phenomenology is found in various forms of humanistic counseling or psychotherapy in differing expressions, including the aim of sensing an organismic whole, allowing a *Gestalt* to emerge, grasping the spiritual content of a phenomenon, or in the attempt to understand the client or patient through empathic accompaniment.

The Phenomenological Attitude

The phenomenological attitude is practiced by becoming inwardly empty, awake, and receptive; by experiencing what is happening, while removing myself and my concerns from the experience of the other; and receiving, experiencing, recognizing the other empathically. Phenomenology is a fundamental attitude that consists of an inner and outer openness and allows the other to remain in their uniqueness (Längle, 2003, 2016). Existential psychotherapists have learned to adopt this attitude actively and intentionally. We summarize here the requirements for adopting and cultivating such a phenomenological attitude.

Description of Concrete Facts and Details. The *concrete* is the foundation for phenomenological perception. Phenomenology cannot be conducted with abstract constructs, but requires the concrete, because the concrete still contains the totality of information, and has not been distilled into abstractions (Vetter, 2007). In order to grasp the concrete, a description is required, that is, an unmediated account of the situation and conditions. The exact and factual description grounds the process in facticity. However, we humanistic clinicians cannot remain stuck here; we do not look to the facts and details, but *through* them, *beyond* them. Facts are necessary but not sufficient conditions. They are like little puzzle pieces from which we compile the whole picture. The concrete, factual elements of perception lend an objective content, in spite of the subjectivity of such perception. Whether or not the perceived is "conscious" or "unconscious" is not of primary importance, because much information is also sensed and felt intuitively. Phenomenological "depth" is not necessarily the same as dealing with the "unconscious" in depth psychology. Phenomenological depth can be conscious or unconscious to the client, it can be a felt drive as well as any other content that actually moves the client, and it contains always the client's personal, and often unconscious, way of dealing with the content. Thus, the "phenomenological depth" differs in most cases from the so-called "unconscious" of depth psychology.

This method of observation leads to a primordial phenomenological experience through which we gain entrance to the whole. Suddenly, with the help of this phenomenological attitude and method, we can see much, as we see through a symptom or behavior to the person, to the whole that appears through all these *tesserae* (parts of the mosaic). It is an experiencing that reminds us of a keyhole experience: We approach a phenomenon (e.g., listening to the individual statements of a patient or client) and linger with the description of the details. Initially they may not reveal much—we see very

little here, as we do when we attempt to look through a keyhole from a distance. But once we have reached a critical threshold of impression, a (bigger) picture gradually begins to emerge. It is as if we have come closer to the keyhole, and can suddenly see through it, and recognize the large room on the other side.

Freedom. Phenomenology is a liberating manner of observation. It emphasizes the importance of objectifying neither oneself or the other, nor turning oneself into an instrument or object of investigation. This respect before human beings as subjects requires a three-fold liberation: As the observer, I permit the others' freedom, allowing them in their perception to do with me "as they will," that is, allowing them to act upon me freely and without resistance. This requires trust in the other and myself, since I cannot open myself otherwise. Such trust is a tremendous step. By allowing the other to affect me, I allow the other to enter into me with their effect. As soon as I resist this, I stop the phenomenological way of seeing. With this openness I also free myself, handing myself over to the spontaneous experience that arises in me. I abstain from all prescriptions and presuppositions, and thereby become vulnerable, trustingly surrendering myself to the pure perception. In the therapeutic dialogue I invite my partner, the patient or client, to assess my phenomenological perception, which I offer freely and open-handedly. I do not say authoritatively or dogmatically, "This is how it is," but rather, "This is how it seems to me in this moment," and ask for his or her perspective. This three-fold freeing is the opposite of manipulation and empowerment. It adds excitement and suspense to phenomenological depth perception, since even the perceiver cannot anticipate what spontaneously emerges from this freedom.

Openness. Openness means the willingness to allow oneself to be affected and touched by what has been perceived. Openness therefore means open-mindedness, accessibility, sensitivity, and receptivity toward the other. Through the decision for openness, we allow the bits of sense information to affect us, and thereby gain an impression of the whole.

Epoché. *Epoché* is a central activity of phenomenology. *Epoché* (in Greek, "withholding") describes the phenomenological reduction through which the previously-held evaluations about the outer world are temporarily suspended. Phenomenological work requires withdrawing oneself from the prejudices and preconceptions of everyday life, and withholding or bracketing previously gained insights. With regard to psychotherapeutic praxis, this means

that, during an initial consultation with a patient suffering from anorexia, for example, the therapist would deliberately set aside all prior clinical knowledge about treatment, co-occurring conditions, and common family constellations, in order to open him or herself up to the concrete and immediate impression of the other. *How is this individual seated before us right now? Where can we see the person shining through? What speaks to me most strongly? How does the patient's problem present itself to me here and now? How do I feel in the presence of the patient and when I listen to her or him empathically?* This way of perception is only possible when we exclude our own prior knowledge and presuppositions. If it is not possible to place our own experiences and theoretical structures into *epoché*, our perception of the essential may become distorted through the biases of our own preconceived constructs.

How does *epoché* actually take place in practice? The "bracketing" of the *epoché* does not mean the total elimination of prior knowledge, of what we have learned, or of our personal and professional prejudices, but instead a temporary setting aside, a deferral for the duration of the seeing (*Ep-echein*—"covering with one's hand" would be a literal translation of the term). *Bracketing* is a form of self-distancing. We allow everything to emerge in our stream of consciousness, but not everything is taken up. What does not belong to the object within view is bracketed or set aside in order to keep the view open for our perception.

Synthesis. From the individual sense-impressions, a figure takes shape, a Gestalt is created, like a picture composed of individual mosaic pieces. The whole picture is more than the sum of the parts, because these parts are interdependent, and do not lay about randomly. The whole picture is formed from the interplay of the individual pieces, which stand in relation to one another, and which all speak of *the same* (essence). Phenomenological seeing is essentially spiritual seeing, synthetic seeing, seeing holistically from the heart. This synthesis allows two antinomies of phenomenology to come into view: (1) the antinomy between dependence on sense-impressions and simultaneously leaving them behind; (2) the antinomy between the objective content and subjective perception. The subjective perception contains something objective. The task of subjective synthesis consists of involving myself mentally, in empathic sensing, which allows the whole (Gestalt) to emerge in the light of my own vitality and spirit. This whole contains both the perceived and the perceiver. The object–subject split, as postulated by Descartes (1637/2006) and taken up by the natural sciences, is overcome in phenomenology. The phenomenological attitude can hence be defined as an attitude of openness, in combination with a presuppositionless dedication to the matter at hand.

Phenomenology as a Method: The Steps of Phenomenological Perception

The foundation of seeing deeply and essentially is always the phenomenological attitude, as described above. Seeing *that* which shows itself and *how* it shows itself, is revealed through Heidegger's (1975) three key questions:

1. What shows itself (spontaneously)? (description and reduction)
2. What is it? (construction)
3. Is this really so? (destruction; factuality, holism, openness)

The important phenomenological questions in psychotherapeutic language are:

1. *What shows itself to me, the therapist?*
2. *What do I understand? What is my overall impression? What appears to me as important? How do these things hang together?* and finally,
3. *Is this really what is important? Is this everything that you and I, together, have understood?*

These three steps lead to the psychotherapeutic cultivation of an inner phenomenology of the patient in relation to him or herself, which is supported by the seeing of the therapist. The goal of existential and humanistic psychotherapy is to facilitate this kind of personal access in the patient and to practice it in therapy. Instead of interpreting oneself and coming to premature and often derogatory or inaccurate conclusions, this process aims to develop a sharper view of one's own personhood, and for an open and understanding dealing with oneself. In Existential Analysis specifically, this general three-step Heideggerian procedure is elaborated in the processual method of *personal existential analysis* (Bauer, 2016; Längle, 2003).

Conclusion

A rigorous phenomenological approach does not interpret the patient's or client's experiences through the lens of a particular theory or prior knowledge but attempts instead to detect the original, personal, individual, and unique content contained in that experience. A phenomenological approach to psychotherapy is grounded in a dialogical openness, with the radical requirement for practitioners to open themselves up and give themselves

over to their client, and then offer their own essence and deep personal sensing in return. The key to accessing the client's intuitively felt deep content is the therapist's own inner access to his or her own depth. Shared depth brings ashore what is essential in the process and can facilitate a deeper understanding for the patients or clients themselves. This is the other goal of applying phenomenology in psychotherapy: to assist patients or clients in gaining a better understanding of themselves with the help of external methods, as well as training them in applying this approach to themselves, in order to come to an increasingly clearer and more accurate self-understanding.

In the faithful application of the phenomenological attitude and method, the existential therapist restricts his or her speaking to the *present* (to what shows up right now), to the *subjective* (how something appears to me), refrains from *ontologizations* ("you are . . . this is . . .") and *judgments* ("this is good or bad"), and remains mindful that the task of finding the essential is always unfinished ("Did I understand you correctly? . . ."). Phenomenological work requires the courage to engage the subjective in oneself, as well as a lot of training and self-reflection in discerning critically between one's own content ("projections" and "countertransference"), and what stems from the clients themselves. The danger of this kind of confusion can never be totally excluded but can be reduced through lifelong experience and ongoing clinical supervision.

Authors' Note

Alfried Längle is also affilaited with Sigmund Freud University (SFU), Vienna, Austria.

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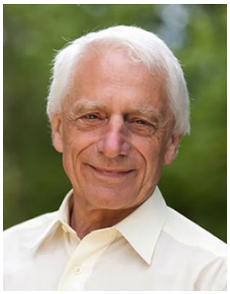

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