

## **Phenomenology and the Gestalt Therapy Phenomenological Method**

The founders of Gestalt therapy studied and were influenced by a number of theorists. These theorists include those who have developed concepts about science (field theory: Lewin), perception (Gestalt psychology: Goldstein), philosophy (phenomenology: Husserl & Heidegger); philosophy & theology ("I and thou": Buber), learning (experiential learning: Kolb & Lewin), etc. These theorists are not Gestalt therapists and did not contribute to the literature of Gestalt therapy. However, the founders of Gestalt therapy have applied some of the principles and concepts of these theorists to a methodology that is used in Gestalt therapy. So as a Gestalt therapist or Gestalt practitioner we can say we practice a methodology that is phenomenological, dialogical/relational, field sensitive and experiential.

### **The theoretical base of phenomenology**

Phenomenology is a philosophy and a methodology that had its beginnings in the early years of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Husserl is acknowledged as the founder. As a philosophy it seeks to understand that which can be experienced through human consciousness. It seeks to understand how the experience "is experienced by the experiencer" (Giorgi, 2009, p. 40). It holds that nothing can be known unless the knowing comes through consciousness. It is a philosophical movement of multiple perspectives and at times contrary emphasis (Giorgi, 2009). It was developed, in part at least, as a reaction to the supposedly objective claims of science and the scientific method. It makes clear that no perception can be objective and all perception owes much to the thinking and experience of the perceiver.

A phenomenon is anything that presents itself to consciousness. The phenomenological method shuts off any judgment or prior knowledge about the experience. Here is introduced the notion of epoche or bracketing and that involves putting aside any past knowledge about whatever is present. Unprejudiced attention is directed to the experience in the present. It is a method that attempts to

allow phenomenon to be simply as it is. The rule of epoche is accompanied by two other rules: that of description and horizontalization. The rule of description calls for the observer to provide a concrete and immediate impression without interpretation (describe as opposed to interpret). The rule of horizontalization or equality holds that no element is more important than another (Crocker, 2005; Fairfield, 2004).

Two important aspects of phenomenology are the lifeworld and free imaginative variation (Giorgi, 2009). The lifeworld as understood by Hesserl is the world of the ordinary that all humans encounter. This world is often taken for granted by other worlds, e.g. the business world, the academic world, science world etc. The principle of free imaginative variation can help discover the essence of a phenomenon or help clarify the meaning of an experience. Free imaginative variety involves mentally removing an aspect of the phenomenon to see if the phenomenon is transformed. The phenomenological approach offers openness and rigour. Every aspect of the phenomenon is considered a legitimate topic for investigation, a wide scope is given for determining the relevance of any given and every given is described precisely giving rigor (Giorgi, 2009, p. 70).

Psychology and other methods of psychotherapy have embraced a phenomenological method. In this context phenomenology is defined as being the philosophical doctrine that advocates that the basis of psychology or psychotherapy is the scientific study of immediate experience. The phenomenological approach seeks to understand through enquiry the subjective and perceptual life of a client.

How Gestalt therapy has applied the philosophy and methodology of phenomenology to the practice of psychotherapy is worthy of attention. "Obviously, when perspectives intersect with one another rather than function within their own comfortable frameworks, scholars must modify their expectations concerning mixed expressions with their disciplines" (Giorgi, 2009, p. 1). Gestalt therapy theorists and practitioners have modified phenomenology to form a base for the practice of

Gestalt therapy. They have described the application of the phenomenological method for work with individuals, couples & families, groups and organisational work. The application of phenomenology is also accompanied by an application of dialogue/relational, perspectives, field sensitivity and an experiential approach.

### **The Gestalt Therapist**

For the Gestalt therapist the philosophy and the method of phenomenology have been applied to the practice of psychotherapy. It is the method of the Gestalt therapist. It is the method of enquiry into how clients have made meaning in their life. It acknowledges that all people experience the phenomenon of the world around them: all people experience life in their lifeworld and in the other worlds they engage in. Each of them also makes their own unique meaning around their experience of living their life. Some of this meaning is drawn from the experiences of childhood. Gestalt therapists listen to how a client has made meaning of his or her experience and watch how clients express this meaning. The client's phenomenological expression, words, body processes, ideas, etc, tells us how he or she has made meaning. The Gestalt therapist lets the client know what he or she is hearing (the words), what we see (the body processes) what we understand (the client thinking processes made obvious to the therapist) and checks with the client whether she or he is correctly understanding the client. This is the methodology of Gestalt therapy, the phenomenological method. Gestalt therapists bracket their own meaning and other meanings they could draw on while they are attending to understanding the way a client engages in life. This bracketing involves the therapist meeting the client with a hermeneutic of suspicion, that is an understanding that the way the therapist understands something may not be the way the client is understanding it.

Phenomenology involves the process of discovering the obvious rather than relying on interpreting. Gestalt therapy has been identified as the "therapy of the obvious," (Perls, cited in Philippson, 1998). The process starts from the surface and follows a person's experience. This process does not

specifically seek out the unconscious, but stays with what is present and aware. It is awareness that is seen as curative and growth producing (the Gestalt Institute of Philadelphia, u.d). Gestalt's phenomenological method has embraced Heidegger's existentialist version of phenomenology as well as Buber's philosophy of meeting the other (Crocker, 2005). Heidegger attempted to claim back the lived experience of ordinary human beings. This has application to the Gestalt therapy process of beginning with the organism-environment of the individual in his or her field (Crocker, 2005).

The method demands that the therapist follow the logic of what appears until a grasp of the essence of what is appearing becomes visible. Firstly using the rule of bracketing. The therapist follows his or her curiosity not with "a bare mind, forgetting everything we know" (Crocker, 2009, p. 20) but with a freshness that sets aside presuppositions and preconceptions about experience (Crocker, 2009). The therapist's curiosity is key and instrument to the process because the therapist's experience will shape any curiosity and this will become the ground to understanding what is happening for the client and how the client has organized and ordered how he or she understands his or life and being.

Secondly, using the rule of description. The method then draws on the therapist to make visible through description what has been observed and noted. This process will encourage curiosity in the client, to draw out the specific and the concrete, and to suggest paths of deeper exploration. The Gestalt therapist can do this by suggesting, contracting and enacting experiments. Such active curiosity reveals the client's life themes, beliefs, habitual patterns and meaning making (Crocker, 2009). Consequently, more of the client's inner world become available for exploration and description by the client and therapist and this process opens up possibilities for choiceful change. Crocker identifies the Gestalt approach as an "emergent approach" (Crocker, 2009, p. 24) where the client's diagnosis becomes evident and treatment processes become visible.

Thirdly, using the rule of horizontalisation. This will involve the therapist attending to what the description and exploration uncover. The therapist will need to name what is obvious, what is teasing to him or her in the encounter and what may have been unattended to or unnoticed. This relies on the therapist's insights and perception. What is spoken by the therapist will draw from the ground of discovery and description. It will need to be inspected by the therapist with a hermeneutic of suspicion before being spoken and it will need to be checked out with the client for veracity and detail. It may sound something like: "I hear you say that you want to be important and I am wondering if you hold a belief deep inside of you that you have little value?" This statement can only come after much exploration and description. The therapist again uses him/herself as instrument of the process of the therapy because the therapist makes a jump from what the client says to what may be held by the client that has not as yet been inspected. At times what needs to be said by the therapist is not dared to be voiced by the client. Such steps by the therapist need to build on a strong dialogical/relational base. As such these steps can be a frightening for the beginning therapist. Once such a step is taken the therapist needs to allow time for the client to experience and breath in what has been given and check the veracity of the therapist's intervention. The therapist also needs to invite the client to adjust and change what has been said and voice the new in his or her own words. The phenomenological approach is a powerful and engaging way to meet the client.

### **Group process work and phenomenology**

A phenomenological approach is also recommended as the methodology for engaging in group process. In this way the facilitator can attend to what is "experience-near in groups" (Fairfield, 2004, p. 336) and pay regard to field imperatives. It will also follow the rules of the method:

1. Bracketing: This will allow openness to the immediate experience so any interpretation will be held lightly and will be reversible. This will include knowledge of other group theoretical frameworks. It is advised to hold these lightly and draw on them when necessary;

2. Description: This means the facilitator will focus on the most immediate variable of the subjective experiences rather than any explanation. It will mean that the facilitator will describe this experience as much as is possible and practical in concrete terms; and,
3. Horizontalisation: This means that the facilitator won't ignore what is obvious. The facilitator will acknowledge that the number of things that can be given attention will be limited and will attend to anything that actually occurs to him or her. (Fairfield, 2004, p. 336)

<http://www.gisc.orgwww.gisc.org/gestaltreview/documents/GestaltGroupsRevisited-APhenomenologicalApproach.pdf>

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