



The Value of Relatedness in Existential Psychotherapy and Phenomenological Enquiry

by Ernesto Spinelli

Abstract

Existential psychotherapy places pivotal significance upon the inter-relational aspects of human experience. By so doing, the therapeutic relationship itself becomes the principal means through which the client's presenting symptoms and disorders are disclosed as direct expressions and outcomes of the client's overall "way of being" rather than as isolated and disruptive impediments. At the same time, existential therapy emphasises the actual relationship that emerges between psychotherapist and client and argues that it is via the contrast and comparison of this lived experience with that of their 'wider world' experience that clients can find the means to reconsider and reconstruct their "ways of being". This paper seeks to demonstrate that, as well as their shared aims and methods of enquiry, it is the mutual emphasis upon inter-relatedness as a foundational value for human enquiry that reveals substantive and intriguing points of connection between existential psychotherapy and phenomenological enquiry. The paper furthermore argues that existential psychotherapy might best be viewed as a clearly formulated expression of phenomenological enquiry.

Natural Science and Human Science Research

As is generally agreed, it was Wilhelm Dilthey who first proposed a distinction between the natural sciences and the human sciences (Hodges, 1952). He argued that these different endeavours require different methodologies, since the former are based on models of explanation while the latter are based on enterprises focused upon intuitive understanding. The impact of this distinction has been felt nowhere more strongly than in the arena of psychotherapy research, wherein persistent and recurring criticism continues to be levelled at the questionable value of psychotherapeutic analyses which are predicated upon natural scientific, modernist assumptions and accordingly fashioned by the dictates of a logico-empiricist methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Kvale, 1994; Mahrer, 2000).

The dominant attitude towards psychotherapy research claims to have as its aim the production of "a

body of facts ... that can be objectively discovered using a methodology modelled on the natural sciences" (Kaye, 1995, p. 36). Such a perspective, while initially appealing to some, is stripped of its allure when one considers its implications.

On investigation, it becomes evident that what this kind of research does is to address central questions by transforming them into something else which conforms to the dictates of a natural science paradigm. John Kaye (1995), writing about the impact of this paradigm on psychotherapy research in particular, summarizes the broader impact upon psychological research as a whole:

Research within this frame necessitates either the reduction of the phenomenon being studied to quantifiable terms, or the selection for study of only those aspects of the phenomenon which can be converted into measurable terms. ... [T]his can only

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result in a partial picture ... one which also misrepresents its holistic, contextual nature. (p. 46)

What alternative do we have? To return to Dilthey, the human science view argues that an interpretatively-focused investigative activity "cannot be accomplished by observing the individual as a complex mechanism geared to respond to certain conditions in regular ways; rather we have to get inside the forms of life and the socially normative regularities in which the person's activity has taken shape. This requires ... [a]n empathic and imaginative identification with the subject" (Gillett, 1995, p. 112).

When considered within the framework of psychotherapy, human science research highlights our awareness that the therapeutic enterprise inevitably involves the investigation and interpretation of *meaning* - which is to say, the whole gamut of both explicit and implicit beliefs, assumptions, biases, attitudes, and values, together with their concomitant affective and behavioural components, that are maintained by a person.

In addition, as Rom Harré (1991) has expressed it, the dominant natural science paradigm adopted by much of psychological and psychotherapeutic inquiry rests upon the "illusion of individual subjectivity" (p. 16) that cannot be maintained. "Many psychological phenomena which have traditionally been ascribed to individual people are actually joint products of essentially conversational interactions" (Harré, 1991, p. 16).

Phenomenological Research

One way of acknowledging the concerns being presented is to consider both the enterprise of psychotherapy and the issues posed by it that require structured enquiry from the standpoint of *phenomenological investigation*. Phenomenology was initially seen by Edmund Husserl as a practical or scientific philosophy that would allow a method of enquiry into all aspects of lived experience and mental activity. The task of phenomenological investigation became that of illuminating and disclosing the meaning structures of lived experience (Dreyfus, 1982; Husserl, 1931; Ihde, 1986; Spinelli, 2005). Phenomenology takes the view that experience is not an internal, intrapsychic process. Rather than being 'inside our heads', experience is always concerned with, and an expression of, inter-relation. Experience is always already out in the world.

The primary task of phenomenological research is to illuminate and disclose the make-up, or way of being, of any given structure in its form of meaning. As such, its initial focus on the specific and subjective is only a stepping off point for its exploration of the

more universal 'structuredness' of any experience. Put succinctly, phenomenological research inquiry urges a stance that has been expressed by Knorr-Certina as that of turning "the obvious into the problematic" (Knorr-Certina, 1981; quoted in Kaye, 1995, p. 30).

Phenomenological inquiry stands in contrast to the natural scientific viewpoint and its underlying assumptions because the questions it poses and the methods it employs are grounded in a carefully articulated, but undeniably different, set of philosophical assumptions. What, then, might be some of the most immediate implications of phenomenological research for contemporary psychology and psychotherapy?

It is my view that there exists a coherent and cohesive inter-relation between the enterprise of phenomenological enquiry and the enterprise of psychotherapy as understood from an existential perspective. Indeed, it is my contention that we can consider existential psychotherapy as an *expression* of phenomenological research in terms of its shared aims, methods of enquiry and, perhaps most significantly, its values in general and specifically its values regarding inter-relatedness. The remainder of this paper will focus principally upon these points.

Existential Psychotherapy

Perhaps more explicitly than any other current model or approach to psychotherapy, existential psychotherapy bestows an undisputed centrality upon the relationship between psychotherapist and client. Existential psychotherapists have long argued that it is through this relationship itself that the client's issues are disclosed or 'brought forth' for examination. In other words, the therapeutic encounter is seen to be the 'microcosm' which both explores and expresses the client's currently-lived experience of the possibilities and limitations of inter-relational being in the world (Cohn, 1997; Spinelli, 1997, 2001; Strasser & Strasser, 1997).

Existential psychotherapists take the view that the primary dilemmas, disturbances and disorders that are presented to them as being in some way problematic for the client can be seen to originate from, and are embodied expressions of, the client's ongoing overall interpersonal relations. These relations can be seen to express the client's experience of how it is to exist in the world from his or her uniquely lived "way of being" or worldview. It is further held that this worldview is maintained by the client's implicit assumptions, beliefs, feelings, attitudes and values (in general, the whole gamut of available human experiential possibilities) concerning his or her stance toward self, others and the world in general (Laing,

1960; Laing & Esterson, 1964; Spinelli, 1997, 2001, 2005; Yalom, 1980, 1989).

As such, existential psychotherapists have argued that the symptomatic disorders and dilemmas encountered by the client are direct expressions and consequences of the client's wider stance toward being - that is to say, they are expressions and consequences of his or her currently lived worldview.

Any attempt to remove, amend or "re-shape" the former will have its impact upon the latter, and wider, arena of self/world relations. Consequently, it remains an all-too-likely possibility that the effects of such an impact may provoke for the client a far greater degree of tensions and disturbances in living (existence tensions) than were experienced prior to the therapeutic manipulation of the presenting disorder. In recognition of this possibility, existential psychotherapists attempt neither to isolate nor to pathologise the various existence tensions that are expressed by the client via his or her worldview. Nor do they take the amelioration or removal of such symptomatic tensions to be their primary task. Rather, together with the client, they attempt to expose and consider these symptoms as interrelated expressions of the client's wider "way of being" so that the implications of their maintenance, reduction or removal for that "way of being" can be considered and evaluated.

On the basis of this, albeit brief, summary of existential psychotherapy, the emphasis given to the therapeutic relationship by this approach should become clearer. How better to expose and examine inter-relational disturbances and tensions than via the existing relationship between client and therapist? Such a means of exploration permits an *experiential immediacy* to all discourse regarding the client's worldview. It is this 'intersubjective turn', I believe, that provides existential psychotherapy with a significant critique of other approaches adopted within contemporary psychotherapy - not least with regard to providing psychotherapy with the means by which the world can be directly 're-embraced' within the psychotherapeutic relationship.

The Dialogical Realms of Encounter

In my own work, I have suggested that the adoption of an existential approach to psychotherapy illuminates various realms of dialogical focus, of which three in particular are viewed as essential arenas to be examined and clarified. These can be most simply described as being the *I-focused*, *you-focused* and *we-focused* realms of encounter. Each realm can be briefly distinguished as follows:

The *I-focused realm of encounter* attempts to describe and clarify *my experience of being "myself" in any*

given relationship. It asks, in effect, "What do I tell myself about my current experience of being me in this encounter?" The following are dialogical examples of an *I-focused realm of encounter*: "I'm scared"; "I wish I was more interesting"; "I am being punished and I deserve it because I was not good to my parents".

The *you-focused realm of encounter* attempts to describe and clarify *my experience of the other's experience of me*. ("What do I tell myself about your experience of me in any given encounter?"). The following are dialogical examples of a *you-focused realm of encounter*: "You find me boring"; "You like me"; "You laugh at my jokes as though I need to be humoured".

The *we-focused realm of encounter* attempts to describe and clarify *each participant's (i.e. the client's and the psychotherapist's) experience of "us" being in relation with one another*. ("What do we each tell ourselves about the experience of being *us* in the immediacy of this encounter?"). The following are dialogical examples of a *we-focused realm of encounter*: "We really seem to be connecting right now"; "Even though neither one of us is saying anything at the moment, it feels like we're communicating in important ways"; "We keep missing each other and this makes us over-cautious in what we end up expressing".

The *we-focused realm of encounter* is characterised by its *immediacy* - it is concerned with, and expresses, that which is being experienced "in the moment" of engagement with the other from a person-to-person standpoint. As such, it expresses explicitly that inter-relational grounding which exists (and is more implicitly expressed) in *I-focused* and *you-focused* statements.

While existential psychotherapy attempts a descriptive exploration of all three realms of encounter in order that the therapist can attempt to 'enter', with increasing adequacy, the currently-lived world of the client, an explicit and overriding emphasis is placed upon the third (*we-focused*) realm (Spinelli, 1994, 1997, 2001, 2005). The existential psychotherapist's willingness to examine and consider what emerges experientially through this realm as being real and valid (rather than substitutive, symbolic, or 'transfereential') serves to implicate his or her current manner of existence as expressed through the interactive relationship with the client. This focus further serves to expose and clarify *in the immediacy of the current encounter* the self-same inter-relational issues that clients express as being deeply problematic within their wider world relations. But ...

As I have discussed elsewhere (Spinelli, 2001, 2005),

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what may be attractive about the existential approach to many psychotherapists and clients alike is its explicit promotion of “notions of freedom, choice, responsibility - so long as these terms are understood and interpreted from a subjective perspective which both internalises and isolates such notions and the actions associated with them. In other words ... If I choose to act in a way that I believe will ‘free up my possibilities’ but which you experience as oppressive or painful or undesirable, then, from an isolationist standpoint, I can respond to your experience as being ‘your choice’ ... and can abdicate any sort of responsibility for it” (Spinelli, 2001, p. 15).

On reflection, what becomes evident is that this subjectively-focused distortion obscures the more complex and disquieting implications arising from an inter-relational perspective. In other words, what appears to have been missed or minimized by many advocates of existential psychotherapy is that, “from an existential standpoint, questions of choice, freedom and responsibility cannot be isolated or contained within some separate being (such as ‘self’ or ‘other’). ... [V]iewed in this way, no choice can be mine or yours alone, no experienced impact of choice can be separated in terms of ‘my responsibility’ versus ‘your responsibility’, no sense of personal freedom can truly avoid its interpersonal dimensions” (Spinelli, 2001, p. 16).

The acknowledgement of an unavoidable and foundational inter-relational grounding which underpins *all* subjective experience challenges numerous assumptions surrounding the therapeutic relationship. Pivotal among these, I would suggest, is the acknowledgement of “the world” within the therapeutic relationship.

For most psychotherapists, “the world” is to be excluded from the therapeutic enterprise. Some may suggest that, once the door to the consulting room has been shut, the therapist and client can be seen to inhabit a special and exclusive “world” of their making. Similarly, it has been argued that, in this “world-excluding world”, it is the role of the therapist to represent, or “stand-in” for, all others in the client’s world-relations. While I would agree, in part, with these contentions, I would also argue that the subservience to such points of view opens psychotherapy, and the psychotherapeutic relationship, to pertinent critique surrounding issues of solipsistic indulgence and excess (Alexander, 1995; Masson, 1989; Sands, 2000; Smail, 1996).

As such, I have suggested that, in addition to the previous three realms of relationship discussed above, there exists a fourth inter-relational realm that is *they-focused*.

The *they-focused realm of encounter* concerns itself

with “the client’s experience of how those who make up his or her wider world of ‘others’ (extending beyond the other who is the psychotherapist) experience their own inter-relational realms in response to the client’s current way of being and, in addition, to the novel ways of being that have presented themselves as possibilities to the client through psychotherapy” (Spinelli, 2001, p. 33). The exploration of this fourth realm, I would suggest, becomes most significant when the client, through therapy, has reached a point of considering alternative “ways to be”.

The following example should provide a straightforward means to illustrate the import and impact of the exploration of this fourth realm within the therapeutic relationship:

A man in his early forties has come to therapy because his marriage of fifteen years has become unexciting and predictable. He is bored with his life and his work and finds both to be meaningless and empty. He has met another woman who makes him feel more alive and potent than he has felt himself to be for quite some time. While he loves his wife and children, and has no desire to hurt them, he feels that he has the right to find the means to actualize himself by beginning a new life. Eventually, via therapy, he becomes clear that this possible new life is what he wants and is prepared to be honest with his wife and children, his friends and work colleagues, and will initiate divorce proceedings, give up his job, and begin anew.

From a *subjective* perspective, one could argue that the client is being ‘more real and congruent’, more focused upon his ‘real self’, more integrated. The therapeutic work has been completed.

From an *inter-relational* perspective, however, there remains a great deal to be examined. Via enquiry centred upon the *they-focused realm*, the therapist asks the client to consider, firstly, how he (the client) experiences the meaning and effect of his decision from the standpoint of his wife, his children, the new woman in his life, his friends, his colleagues. Secondly, the therapist asks the client to consider the meaning and impact of his decision upon, for instance, his wife’s relations with each of their children and their friends; or each child’s relations with his/her mother, his/her other sibling; or his friends’ relations with one another; or the relations between his colleagues, and so forth.

This *they-focused realm* reveals that there exist so many relations upon which the client’s decision impacts, that it would in fact be inter-relationally irresponsible not to attend to at least those that the client himself has highlighted as being significant.

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These explorations are not intended to alter or prevent the client's decision, nor to impose the therapist's moral stance upon him, nor to expose the *actual* views of all of these others in the client's world; "rather, this focus upon these more world-focused dimensions serves to implicate his decision, his newly-chosen way of being, in such a way that it includes his lived experience of the world and the others who exist within it, as it is in all its confounding complexity, rather than permit him to avoid its consideration or to construe and maintain the possibility of a world that does not fit his lived experience" (Spinelli, 2001, pp. 17-18).

The unorthodox and iconoclastic relational psychotherapist, Leslie Farber, was, and in my view remains, the foremost critic of the world-excluding tendencies of the psychotherapeutic relationship (Farber, 1967, 2000). Deeply influenced by Martin Buber's notion of the *interhuman* possibilities of dialogue (Schilpp & Friedman, 1967), Farber's intent was to shift the enterprise of psychotherapy away from a set of inflexible methodological conditions so that these could be replaced by a *morally derived attitude* expressive of a particular way of being with others. For him, being a psychotherapist could not be kept separate from his way of being human. He argued that, "if meeting is to occur in psychotherapy, it will occur despite ... inequalities in position status, background, education or awareness [I]t is up to [the psychotherapist] to address his patient not as an object of knowledge, but as a being engaged in the task (as Kierkegaard puts it) of becoming 'what he is already: namely a human being'" (Farber, 1967, p. 590). In this sense, Farber's meetings with his clients could 'be about' anything; the content of these meetings did not truly matter. Instead, what mattered was that *talk itself* led both therapist and client toward their meeting with themselves and one another. In recognizing that interhuman relations require the acknowledgement of the world as their context, Farber actively, and radically, sought to welcome the world into the therapeutic encounter, whether by the subject matter of the talks in which he engaged with his clients or by deliberately taking the talks out of the secluded confines of his consulting room and into the world at large. By so doing, Farber both subverted the exclusivity of the therapeutic relationship and highlighted its centrality as the unique "meeting point" through which the client may come to re-acknowledge and reconnect with the possibilities of interhuman relations.

Existential Psychotherapy and Phenomenological Research

I hope that this somewhat brief explication has alerted readers to two central ideas infusing existential psychotherapy: Firstly, that existential therapy promotes a shift in the therapeutic enterprise from the

subjective to the inter-relational. And, secondly, that this shift can be seen to introduce a "world-conscious" moral dimension to the arena of psychotherapy, the lack of which has been justifiably criticised by both 'insiders' and detractors of psychotherapy.

I now want to argue that the underpinnings of phenomenological enquiry rely upon a series of key assumptions whose methodological implications reveal significantly similar areas of interest and focus to those adopted by existential psychotherapy. Indeed, as I have suggested, existential psychotherapy might be viewed as a clearly formulated expression of phenomenological enquiry.

Firstly, it is pivotal to recognize that, in general, the phenomenological researcher seeks out a method of listening or investigation which neither denies experience, nor denigrates it, nor transforms it solely into operationally (pre-)defined behaviour. Indeed, the method being sought aims to remain as adequately as possible with human experience as it is experienced, and seeks to sustain contact with the statements made regarding that experience as they are expressed. In this way, if I can extrapolate from the conclusion concerning the aim of psychotherapy arrived at by Leslie Farber (2000), phenomenology is more concerned with 'speaking truthfully' about an experience than it is with the achievement of a final, or 'arrived at', truth.

Secondly, unlike natural science research, phenomenological research assumes an indissoluble inter-relationship between the investigator and his or her focus of investigation, to the extent that both are said to *co-constitute* each other. The bases of such co-constitutionality are *dialogue* and *disclosure*. Individuals and their world are viewed as being always in dialogue with one another in that each is a necessary constituent to the construction of phenomenon-derived reality. Each is partly active and partly passive in relation to the other. Similarly, all interactions reveal, identify, define or, in a word, *disclose* the co-constituents of the interaction. This fundamental assumption is most commonly expressed through terms such as "figure-ground", "self-other" or "I-not I".

Thirdly, phenomenological research rejects the common notion of causality in its uni-directional, linear form. The focus of investigation is not therefore studied or understood in a manner that focuses upon explanations derived from events or circumstances that are claimed to be related in some causal chain of events that are perceived to be uni-directional from some point in the past to the present circumstances. The meaning of both past and present events may certainly be considered and both may prove interesting, but there is no justification for the

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assumption that a specified earlier event caused the latter to occur in a simple, linearly direct manner.

Fourthly, while traditional methods rely upon the isolation and manipulation of specified variables in order to discern causal explanations for particular events, phenomenological methods concern themselves primarily with exploratory strategies designed to accumulate an ever increasingly adequate description of any given phenomenon *as it presents itself* to one's experience.

Fifthly, from the standpoint of phenomenological research, there is no demand on researchers to reduce their focus of investigation to a set of operational definitions that impose an immediate transformative bias upon the event under investigation and further serve to limit its range of definitional possibilities to those which remain open to particular forms of statistical analysis. Rather, phenomenological research acknowledges a multiple, even inexhaustible, range of definitional possibilities. And, once again unlike traditional approaches, it avoids taking a stance that demands the rejection of some data in favour of others because of competing, unique or mutually exclusive variants. Instead, the stance adopted by phenomenological research is complementary-focused, such that all data - even the most idiosyncratic - are duly considered without the need to reject their meaning possibilities.

Finally, the enterprise of phenomenological research is foundationally collaborative. Researchers and their participants (typically labelled *co-researchers*) are partners in the given enterprise whose meanings and purposes are openly revealed and discussed without any intent to deceive, misrepresent or obscure all or part of the process. The phenomenological researcher does not assume that the data will be contaminated by the co-researcher's knowledge, views or unplanned input.

In like fashion, the enterprise of existential psychotherapy can be seen to address and interpret each of these pivotal stances. Focusing upon predominantly *descriptive* enquiry, the challenging and transformative possibilities of existential psychotherapy emerge directly from the cultivation of a phenomenological attitude towards the investigation of the lived worldview of the client *as it presents itself in the immediacy of the psychotherapeutic encounter*. At the same time, existential psychotherapy *implicates* the presence of the psychotherapist in that inquiry, and acknowledges the impact of that presence upon the construction and re-construction of meaning that may take place, both for the client and for the psychotherapist, as both an expression of process and an outcome related to the investigative activity.

By so doing, existential therapy promotes a shift in the therapeutic enterprise from the subjective to the inter-relational. And this shift can be seen, in turn, to introduce a "world-conscious" moral dimension to the arena of psychotherapy, the lack of which has been justifiably criticised by both 'insiders' and detractors of psychotherapy.

It is my hope that this discussion has at least tempted readers to consider that there may be more than superficial similarities between the enterprise of phenomenological inquiry (and human science inquiry in general) and the attitudes and qualities of inter-relational encounter as advocated by existential psychotherapy. More to the point, I hope that readers might be willing to consider that such similarities point us to what may well be *the* critical factor that infuses both human science research and existential therapy: namely, their mutual emphasis upon inter-relatedness as the foundational value upon which any human and humane form of enquiry must rest.

About the Author

Ernesto Spinelli is a Fellow of both the British Psychological Society (BPS) and the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), as well as a UKCP registered existential psychotherapist. In 1999, he was awarded a Personal Chair as Professor of Psychotherapy, Counselling and Counselling Psychology. His authorship of numerous specialist articles and several highly respected and widely-read books dealing with the theory and practice of existential psychotherapy has earned him a BPS Counselling Psychology Division Award for Outstanding Contributions to the Advancement of the Profession as well as an international reputation as a leading figure in the advancement of contemporary existential psychotherapy. In addition to maintaining a private practice as a psychotherapist, executive coach and supervisor, Professor Spinelli is Senior Fellow at the School of Psychotherapy and Counselling, Regent's College, London, and Director of Ernesto Spinelli Associates (ESA). Having recently published a new edition of his best-selling book, *The Interpreted World: An Introduction to Phenomenological Psychology* (Sage, 2005), he is currently completing a practice-focused book on existential psychotherapy.

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