The discipline of phenomenological reduction

To be open to our client’s experience of their world we need to begin by suspending, as far as possible, our own preconceptions of the world. We all interpret our world and to reduce the impact of our interpretations Husserl devised a three-step method. He believed that if we completed the three steps described below, which make up the process of phenomenological reduction, also known as the phenomenological method, we could then be touched by the virgin experience.

Bracketing

All assumptions and expectations concerning how things are or how they should be are set aside through a process of bracketing. By this process we put our experience of the world in a pair of brackets so that we can be touched by the client’s experience afresh. If this is achieved the therapist’s reactions to the experience of meeting the person will not be coloured by their past experience of the world. The therapist will then be as free as possible to meet with the client’s experience, and their reactions and impressions will be in response to the client’s experience rather than the therapist’s perception of the world. We can never be entirely free from our own preconfiguring material, but the process of bracketing will alert us to material that may colour the way in which we perceive the client’s material and therefore ensure that this material does not contaminate our receiving their experience. Successful bracketing leads to a therapeutic stance of openness to the way in which our client perceives their world.

Description

Having bracketed expectations, don’t seek explanations – seek description. The therapist’s responses should also be descriptive and focused on what we perceive. If someone is crossing their arms tightly that is what is explaining the behaviour as ‘phenomenological gestalt’ to the rule of description is centred, descriptive relating and can prove challenging. Experience through their body through the inflexions in their

Horizontalization or equalization

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Experiential exercise
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arms tightly that is what is noticed and described rather than explaining the behaviour as 'defensive' or 'closed'. An example of a phenomenological gestalt 'here and now' experiment that adheres to the rule of description is described in Point 5. Such present-centred, descriptive relating is alien to most in our Western culture and can prove challenging. Also note that people 'describe' their experience through their bodies and the way in which they move, through the inflections in their voice not only through words.

**Horizontalization or equalization**

Having bracketed assumptions and stayed with immediate description, we then take the stance that anything we see or hear is initially of equal significance. This means that an account of a traumatic event will initially be considered no more or less significant than an uncomfortable shuffling or a distant gaze. The therapist also needs to bear in mind the possible equal importance of what is absent from the dialogue, for instance, if someone seeks therapy following a bereavement but does not discuss aspects of their relationship with the deceased.

The therapist remains open to the client's unfolding story without presuming the next part of the picture even if they imagine that they know the next part of the picture.

**Experiential exercise**

*Stand with your face close to a wall and gradually move backwards. As you move backwards note whether you are expecting or anticipating something coming into your field of vision or whether you are trying to interpret something on the periphery of your field of vision. Attempt to just let things enter your experience from a place of not knowing before letting your attention be drawn in a particular direction.*

Most gestalt therapists would agree that we can never be entirely free from assumptions and would align themselves with the idea of being as naïve as possible so that we can then receive as full a sense of the client's phenomenal experience rather than believing that we can transcend all assumptions we have about the world. As Merleau-Ponty so eloquently put it, to 'slacken the threads which attach us to the world' (1962: xiii).