

OUTLINE OF THE EXISTENTIAL-PHENOMENOLOGICAL MODEL

A personal view by Ernesto Spinelli

1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In Continental Europe, the existential-phenomenological model has been recognised and has flourished as a distinct model of psychotherapy since the first quarter of this current century - Ludwig Binswanger's Existential Analysis and Medard Boss' s Daseinsanalysis represent two principal emphases within this model as is, to a lesser extent, Viktor Frankl' s Logotherapy. In the UK, the Society for Existential Analysis has, since 1988, served as the principal organisation uniting therapists who practice existential - phenomenological psychotherapy and, over the years, has further developed and extended many of the central theoretical underpinnings advocated by the model's founders -

While the existential-phenomenological model regards itself as an analytic approach, many of its central concepts and concerns were derived as alternatives to the various Freudian- based psychoanalytic models.

2. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

A. INTERSUBJECTIVITY/BEING-IN-THE WORLD

The fundamental premise of the existential-phenomenological model is that all human knowledge and experience of the various qualities and constituents of our existence is relationally-derived. This co-constituted view argues that all that we are, or are capable of being, all that we reflect upon, define or distinguish can only be placed within the contextual relationship of being/world (or figure/ground, self/other, etc).

As such, the assumed 'split' between subject and object is negated just as, more pertinently, the analytic tendency to focus upon phenomena that are assumed to be ' intrapsychic' is rejected in favour of a view that presents individual psychic phenomena as having their source in the various self/world defining relations that each of us experiences throughout all moments of life- In this way, no individual can be understood in isolation, but rather, always as a being-in-relation. In the therapeutic exploration of any particular person, the quality and quantity of that person's various relations are examined as primary meaning-providers to the whole of his or her self/world

B - THROWNNESS AND CHOICE

The existential -phenomenological model acknowledges that human existence is both limited and conditioned by numerous factors and situations (our 'thrownness' or 'facticity') . Nevertheless, it emphasises the inevitability of choice throughout our lives in that the meanings we construe, the narratives we create, to bring sense and order (however inadequate and limiting as it may be) to our experience are not imposed upon us but, rather, are chosen within the context of our 'situated freedom'- Choice, in this

sense, is not always multi-optional; indeed, in many instances, our choice rests upon the acceptance of the one meaning-choice available rather than the maintenance of the false belief that any number of non-choices remain available to us.

C. THE DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF CONSCIOUS EXPERIENCE

The existential-phenomenological model seeks to 'remain with the phenomena as they present themselves' rather than seek to explain or transform these as superficial or disguised aspects of the 'real' (if hidden) phenomenon. While Freudian-derived approaches broadly seek to 'explain' psychic life, existential-phenomenological approaches seek to 'open the phenomenon to a less restricted view' - What we are aware of at any moment in time is but a minute amount of that to which our consciousness processes, interprets, and responds - In this manner, existential-phenomenology rejects the psychoanalytic notion of 'the unconscious' and replaces it with the idea of reflected and unreflected consciousness. In this way, rather than seek to 'make the unconscious (partly) conscious', it attempts to 'unfold' and 'refocus' conscious awareness -

The existential-phenomenological therapist's attempts to 'unfold' the client's lived experience rest upon a specific form of inquiry - the phenomenological method - which seeks to remain at a descriptive level, focus upon the 'what' and 'how' of experience, rather than posit or provide 'why-based' explanations.

D. THE PAST

Rather than view the past as a causal agent to our current stance and behaviour, existential-phenomenological theory views the importance of the past as the interpretative means by which one's present is validated and one's future possibilities and orientations are clarified. While the material that makes up our past cannot be altered, the interpretations and emphases placed upon it remain subject to continuous re-evaluation- The remembered past, then, is viewed more correctly as 'the past which is currently lived and future-directed'.

E. ANXIETY AND SYMPTOMS

The existential-phenomenological model posits that anxiety is a 'given' of human existence- The inevitability of choice imposes uncertainty upon human experience- In the same fashion, our very ability to interpret and re-interpret our lives presents us with the realisation 'that all knowledge of experience is impermanent, 'plastic', open. At the same time, human beings are aware of the impennanence, or "temporality" of their lives- How we face up to, or avoid facing up to, this one certainty is given expression in the various relations each of us has with self, others, and the world as a whole- Unlike other analytic approaches, the existential-phenomenological model does not view anxiety as a disturbance within one's psyche, or an outcome of an inadequate developmental pattern, but as an inevitable aspect of human existence- While anxiety is neither positive nor negative, some existential-

phenomenological theorists have proposed the notion of 'neurotic anxiety' in order to distinguish those anxieties which may arise when one seeks to diminish or deny the anxieties of living by seeking out an existence which is safely 'cocooned' from life anxiety-

In this fashion, what might be termed neurotic (or even psychotic) behaviour patterns and symptoms can be reconsidered in the light of their ability to protect oneself or provide security from anxiety. Symptoms are not seen as compromise solutions to conflict but are themselves chosen 'possibilities of living'. Existential-phenomenological therapy does not make it its principal task to remove or subdue symptoms. Rather, symptoms are seen as important aspects of the total world-view of the client. They are to be understood as partial expressions of the totality of the client's meaning world and exist in context to that constructed world-view.

The broad points outlined in this summary reveal a number of significant divergences from other analytic and non-analytic therapeutic models. At the same time, there also exist substantial points of convergence with various aspects of Personal Construct Therapy, Sullivan's Interpersonal model, Narrative psychotherapy, Kohut's Self Psychology, and the major post-modern perspectives which are, themselves, derivations and extensions of existential-phenomenological theories.

Nevertheless, existential-phenomenology's fundamental emphasis upon relational inquiry has had substantial and unique impact upon the therapeutic relationship as a whole and upon the analytic assumptions regarding transference and counter-transference, the interpretation of dreams, and the treatment of symptoms.

WORKING EXISTENTIALLY

1- Main interest and attention lies in the exploration of the meanings or constructions each of us enacts and lives by in order to arrive at our own unique experience of being-in-the-world-with-others

2 . Aim is to offer the means for individuals to examine, confront and reassess their understanding of life, the problems encountered throughout their life. and the self and world imposed limits that exist upon the possibilities inherent in being

3. Principal focus is the descriptive exploration of the client's conscious experience of being. therapist's main task is to seek to enter as accurately as possible the client's 'dialogical way of being' in order to clarify and expose the explicit and implicit world-views (attitudes, values, beliefs, judgements) maintained by the client so that they can be examined, acknowledged and possibly altered.

4. This is not simply at an abstractive. logical level. being is an embodied experience - body states, emotions. affective responses, etc are as significant as any other description.