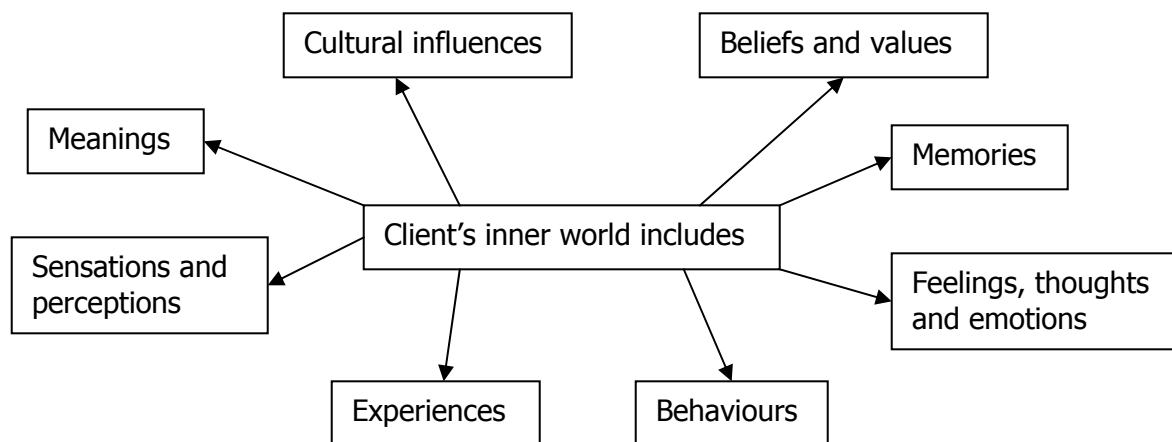


Humanistic counselling: Phenomenology (Husserl 1931)

Phenomenology was originally designed as a way of seeing and describing the inner world of people in psychology, rather than their measurable behaviours. Our inner world is made up of our **thoughts**, our **feelings** and our **behaviours**. We interpret our world and experiences through our **frame of reference**, our own inner landscape. To put our own inner world aside to some extent is one of the hardest tasks of counselling. While in our frame of reference, we don't tend to observe it much, we think it and 'me' are the same thing. We react from it quite intuitively, almost without conscious awareness a lot of the time. We also assume that other people's inner worlds are just like our own, and don't realise how much of our own inner landscape has come from other people.

Internal Frame of reference of the Client (After Sutton and Stewart 1997):



We have to consider the uniqueness of each person's frame of reference in that moment in time – their phenomenology. They may be sat in the same environment as you at the same moment, but the way they experience that moment is seen through their unique frame of reference. If we interpret their story through our own frame of reference we will form judgements or offer advice.

Bracketing:

We can't really put our own frame of reference completely aside but we can become aware of it enough to recognise our own stuff and treat it as such. Gestalt therapy suggests '**bracketing**', stopping to identify thoughts and feelings as they come up and recognising our own assumptions and preconceptions.

Take the example of self harming. From my personal present frame of reference this is harmful and negative behaviour (well, it would be for ME). From someone else's frame of reference it is emotional pain management, a way of reconnecting with self and own needs. If I am stuck in my own frame of reference I cannot hear the main points of someone else's frame of reference

and understand their behaviour, all I can do is fail to understand or offer advice. If I can recognise that is my own stuff and put it aside – bracket it – I can start to get a picture of the client's frame of reference – which will make the behaviour understandable and possibly logical.

Without thinking too much about it, what are your immediate reactions to the following?

- ❖ Katherine's mother has just died of cancer.
- ❖ Ben has just been promoted to a better job.
- ❖ Gemma tells you she has just smacked her 6 year old daughter.
- ❖ Deborah announces her parents have arranged a marriage for her to a man she has never seen.

After your immediate reactions, (from your own frame of reference) can you imagine alternative responses from people with different frames of reference?

Take the situation created a few years ago by Woody Allen and his step-daughter Soon-Yi. He was married to Mia Farrow at the time, who brought into his life a number of natural and adopted children from previous relationships. As Soon-Yi reached adult life, she and Woody Allen decided to form a new partnership and he divorced his wife and set up home with Soon-Yi.

- ❖ What issues are here for you?
- ❖ Now put yourself in Woody Allen's position – where does his position differ from yours (if it does) based on his choices?
- ❖ Now consider Soon-Yi's frame of reference. How does she see Woody and Mia, based on her observed behaviour?
- ❖ If you were counselling people in their position, how would retaining your own frame of reference throughout impact on your ability to empathise?

Equalisation:

The second practical task of phenomenology is to experience everything we perceive from the client as equally important. Within our frame of reference, everything is not equal. Some things are more to the 'front' of our mind at certain times. On the anniversary of an event perhaps, something stands out more than other things. Gestalt therapists describe the 'field' of our inner world and things that stand out right now as 'figures'.

It helps as a counsellor to let the client decide what is 'figural' and remain equally open to everything the client says or does. Keeping our eye on what the client is bringing to the session right now rather than trying to interpret or prioritise or nudge someone in a certain direction is respectful and enables empathy. Gestalt therapy is very immediate and looks at what the client is doing right now, as well as what they are saying. Even in person-centred counselling, we try to avoid being the 'smart therapist' and trust the client to tell their story and develop their own sense of what is presently figural.

Description:

The third method of phenomenology – in research as well as therapy – is description. This is letting the client to hear what they are saying, doing, sensing, and reflect on it. When we paraphrase or reflect what the client has been doing or appears to be feeling we bring it into focus for the client. This requires active listening, not just paraphrasing mechanically at all but building a picture in our own heads (hopefully separate from our own bracketed frame of reference) and sharing our developing understanding with the client. This underpins our core condition of empathy. We use our 'Adult' ego state (from a TA perspective) and stay objective and curious. We encourage the client to explore right across their story, building up our shared understanding of their experience within their frame of reference.