Book Reviews

Phenomenology for Therapists: Researching the Lived World
Pedro Campiao


In this informative and inspiring book psychotherapist and independent consultant Linda Finlay, a plenary speaker with Leslie Greenberg at the 2013 AAGT/GISC conference The Challenge of Establishing a Research Tradition for Gestalt Therapy, has engaged in a thorough and lively way with the phenomenological tradition in both its philosophical complexities and practical application in qualitative research. The result is a useful guide through the world of phenomenological oriented research that attempts to create a bridge between this research tradition and psychotherapy. In this bridge-making endeavour the book offers many rich places for reflection.

Gestalt therapists are well aware how 'phenomenology studies taken-for-granted, everyday examples of the lived world, making explicit the meanings we attach to our human experience' (Finlay, 2011: x). Beyond the world of therapeutic practice influenced by the work of Husserl, phenomenology is becoming seen as an increasingly robust qualitative research paradigm in various social science domains such as nursing, chronic illness and in certain medical domains where the voice of the lifeworld is silenced. Linda Finlay’s book attempts a broad overview highlighting the breadth, depth and scope of the application of phenomenological research methods while arguing for the importance of this research paradigm for the world of psychotherapy.

Although this book, with its summary of the phenomenological tradition and its application to qualitative research, would be useful to both general and advanced readers interested in the subject, Finlay is interested in inspiring and empowering psychotherapists to undertake research. She argues that therapists, with their interpersonal skills focused on attempting to understand the lifeworld of clients, are well positioned to carry out qualitative research with a phenomenological orientation. To Finlay therapists are undertaking phenomenological research all the time; gathering and analysing data through listening, exploring and making sense of a client’s world; through checking out hypotheses or felt senses which lead to further engagement/research; through conducting literature searches on client presentations or novel situations that bring up questions; through reflective inquiry with peers and supervisors. Finlay argues that these therapy skills are transferrable to qualitative research, that both therapy and phenomenological research have similar values, and both involve a dialogical journey of growth for all participants.

Finlay engages the psychotherapy research discourse by arguing that quantitative research, with its gold standard of random controlled trials, is not the only way to evaluate
therapy or explore its effectiveness and value. Here she positions herself on the side of verstehen, the ethical and humanizing hermeneutic process of understanding in contrast to explanation; the currency of reductionist science. Finlay argues the point throughout the book that psychotherapy needs research that discloses and helps us understand the human condition and its vicissitudes, that helps us, through words, to come closer to and enter the lifeworld of another. Considering the political climate regarding validity in the world of psychotherapy research, it is a moot point whether descriptive and hermeneutic research studies of therapy have much political clout. Yet, Finlay’s focus is not so global: to her the importance of these studies lies in local conversations, in therapists talking to each other from their own embodied engagement (research) into their work, thus supporting psychotherapy research to become more human. In this I found the book inspiring.

The book is structured in 3 parts. Part 1 provides an introduction to what Finlay calls ‘The Phenomenological Project’ (Finlay 2011, p. 15), which articulates a number of important phenomenological concepts and thinkers, and the tradition’s underpinning philosophy. Part 2 surveys this tradition as applied in phenomenological research, including an exploration of six phenomenological research approaches. Part 3 provides some practical guidelines to conducting phenomenological research. One of the highlights of this book, and one that strongly enhances its pedagogical value, is its many quotes from phenomenological philosophy and research. In particular the research examples provide important doorways into the structure and texture of what phenomenological research looks like: its process and end result. It is a book on phenomenology that excels in being phenomenological.

Part I The Phenomenological Project: Concepts, Theory and Philosophy

One of the gifts of this book is Finlay’s capacity to cast a wide net across the field of phenomenology to bring forth a personal vision of ‘the phenomenological project’ that I found far reaching in its generosity and inclusiveness. This vision is able to hold in dialogue Husserlian phenomenological approaches and interpretative approaches stemming from Heidegger and Gadamer. It is also grounded in the existential tradition and, affirming Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, the inescapable embodied fact of our intertwinement with the world. Running throughout the book, is Finlay’s thesis that phenomenology is potentially transformative, especially when engaged within an ethical relationality.

To Finlay affirming the fact of our embodiment is pivotal to the process of research and knowledge making. She devotes a section to the body in lived experience, paying careful regard to Merleau-Ponty’s (1968) ontological explorations, and, in what feels like an important move, connecting the latter’s work with Gendlin’s (1997) ‘focusing’ process where it is our capacity to listen to our bodies which allows us to sense what is ‘true’. It is in relation to the way therapists attend to the embodied field of client and therapist, and especially to how therapists use their bodies as epistemological vehicles in accessing meaning and understanding, that Finlay posits therapists have most to give to phenomenological research.

Finlay’s survey of the philosophical foundations of the phenomenological movement provides touchstones from the big three of phenomenology, Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, and the lesser lights of Buber, Gadamer, Sartre, Levinas, de Beauvoir, Ricoeur and Gendlin. With the presentation of these pivotal thinkers Finlay extols the budding phenomenologist to drink at the source and dwell with the words of these original thinkers. The image I am left with after Finlay’s exploration of the philosophical foundations of
phenomenology is of the many connecting threads uniting this tradition. This may not satisfy readers interested in the polemics between phenomenological schools, who see fundamental disjunctures between Husserl and Heidegger and who would gasp at seeing Gadamer being called a phenomenologist.

Part II Phenomenological Research Approaches

I am currently being funded to undertake some research and I found Finlay’s overview of the phenomenological research tradition, which comprises Part 2 of the book, the most thorough and useful for my literature review. Finlay’s survey divides the phenomenological research field into two broad categories, descriptive and hermeneutic approaches, which flow from the philosophical traditions of Husserl and Heidegger respectively. She surveys these two traditions and then explores four additional phenomenological research methodologies which combine descriptive and interpretative elements: lifeworld approaches; interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA); first-person accounts; relational-reflexive approaches. Considering the mixed and eclectic nature of these approaches, Finlay does a useful job in outlining where they share similarities and where differ. At times it appeared to me that the differences were hard to pick and that some of the approaches could easily have been brought together. Yet, as phenomenology as a qualitative approach becomes more widely applicable an explication of its heterogeneity is vital. Finlay’s grasp of the tradition accomplishes this task well.

Through its survey of these phenomenological approaches what this book valuably shows is that, within the application of phenomenology to qualitative research, Husserlian and Gadamerian, descriptive versus interpretative/hermeneutic traditions, are often combined in fruitful ways. This seems to me healthy and in contrast to certain social science discourses where Husserlian phenomenology is strongly disparaged for its difficulty to account for our inevitable historical and cultural situatedness. Throughout the book Finlay maintains a bridge between the spirit of the Husserlian tool kit, the epoche, intentional analysis and eidetic reduction, and the hermeneutic and interpretative discourse. This dialogue appears successful to me and is shown in application through her many examples of research.

Due to its development with psychotherapists in mind, I will here briefly summarize Finlay’s own reflexive-relational research approach, one of the six she explores in part 2. This approach:

‘[parallels] the process of relationally oriented counselling/psychotherapy, arguing that research data does not ‘speak for itself’ but is born within the between of the researcher – co-researcher encounter where they intermingle in ‘pre-analytic participation’ (Finlay 2011, p. 166).

Strongly influenced by the ‘dialogical and ethical spirit’ (Finlay 2011, p. 90) residing in the work of Gadamer, Gendlin, Levinas and Buber, while referencing the intersubjective work of Merleau-Ponty (1968), Hycner & Jacobs (1995), Stolorow & Atwood (1992) and Mitchell & Aron (1999), this methodology involves therapists/researchers harnessing all the skills of embodied knowing, emotional attunement, intersubjective negotiation and therapeutic exploration used daily in their work and focusing these on the co-creation of research. Finlay provides examples of how the reflexive-relational approach has been used in a group context to research the experience of forgiveness and the experience of mistrust.
Although the context is different, one is research the other therapy, a thread running throughout this book is Finlay’s thesis of the similarities between the two and the need for their dialogue to deepen. While there are many strong points of connection between much in this book and Gestalt therapy, a strong resonance exists between Finlay’s reflexive-relational research approach and the more inter-subjectively influenced modes of Gestalt.

**Part III: Phenomenological Methods in Practice.**

The third part of the book explores the process of planning the research, gathering the data, the use of relational ethics as a way to do research with people rather than on people, the process of analysing the data, and producing and evaluating the research. This section of the book balances practicality with inspiration as it articulates research as a personal engagement with life in its specificity and humanity, a process that is driven by what catalyses interest, curiosity and passion in the researcher. Throughout the book Finlay attempts to evoke the phenomenological quest through the words of many pivotal thinkers. Writing about research as a process of questioning, in the light of the Heideggerian concern with the questioning at the heart of the human experience, Finlay quotes Van Manen (1990) on this topic:

‘To truly question something is to interrogate something from the heart of our existence, from the centre of our being...We live this question...Is this not the meaning of research: to question something by going back again and again?...I am indeed animated by this question in the very life that I live’ (van Manen, 1990, p. 43 in Finlay 2011, p. 183).

**Conclusion**

In relatively user friendly language Finlay provides a survey of the state of the art thinking and practice within the phenomenological research tradition. She nests this exploration within an expansive view of phenomenology as a relational and embodied project big enough and generous enough to include many voices flowing from ever nourishing springs. All the while Finlay provides many examples of phenomenological research, practical support in undertaking research, while provoking therapists towards doing so. The result is a satisfying and well structured journey through the land of phenomenological research. Although this book is not a practical how-to research manual and would have to be supplemented by more practical and systematic literature, its value lies in surveying the field, providing various poetic touchstones on what is a very human process of knowledge making, while pointing the reader in useful directions.

**References:**


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