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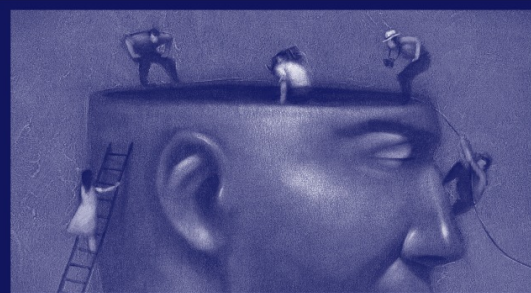
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Structural Existential Analysis (SEA): A Phenomenological Method for Therapeutic Work

Emmy van Deurzen

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Abstract Phenomenology has inspired many forms of therapeutic practice over the past century. This paper summarizes fundamental aspects of phenomenological practice, which are often forgotten. It covers phenomenological, eidetic and transcendental reductions and briefly introduces other aspects of structural existential analysis such as four worlds model, timeline, and emotional compass. The work is brought to life with the case illustration of a client discovering how to make sense of her world by applying phenomenological principles.

Keywords Phenomenology · Philosophy · Existential · Therapy · Eidetic · Transcendental · Four worlds · Emotional compass · Timeline

Introduction

My work as an existential psychotherapist has always rested firmly on the basis of the phenomenological method. This method has guided my work, both in terms of formulating and understanding a client's position in the world and in terms of doing research in the field (van Deurzen 1998, 2010, 2012). This paper will demonstrate how phenomenological principles can be applied to the practice of therapy.

When speaking about phenomenology I refer back to the original formulations of Edmund Husserl. Husserl's work (Husserl 1900, 1913, 1925, 1929) needs to be read and studied before we can fully appreciate how much his

methodology can contribute to psychotherapy. His books, from *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, through his *Ideas*, to his *Phenomenological Psychology* are essential reading for those who want to do phenomenological psychology or therapy. If you are just starting to explore phenomenology Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* (Husserl 1929) is a good place to begin. Otherwise try an introductory text like that of Moran (2000). Phenomenology is not just the foundation of qualitative research, a technique to rival with statistical analysis, but a new way of looking at the world for both therapist and client. Practising phenomenology teaches you systematic observation and self-observation. It demands that you challenge yourself in your affective and experiential life and that you are prepared to become aware of your usual assumptions, values and biases, in other words, it requires you to see how you make sense of the world and how you situate yourself in it. This is an essential prerequisite for doing phenomenological therapy. We cannot understand other people's worldviews unless we have learnt to consider our own.

What is Phenomenology?

Though many people have at least heard of phenomenology these days, they often have misconceptions about it. Phenomenology is the study of phenomena as we experience them. It is not, as many people imagine, the study of subjectivity. It is the study of all conscious phenomena: a methodical study of the process of human awareness and the experiences we have. Brentano's concept of intentionality is its starting point. Brentano was both Husserl's and Freud's teacher. Husserl carefully elaborated Brentano's original idea, that human consciousness is always related and directed towards something outside of itself.

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The objective of phenomenology is to refine intentionality. As a mathematician Husserl aimed to provide a better method for dealing with human consciousness than mathematics or logic, since he considered these methods to be inadequate in capturing the essence of human experience and its objects.

Husserl observed that any statement we make or any experience we have includes three elements: a subject, a predicate and an object. These are inseparable and constitute the intentional arc of consciousness. Each act of consciousness has a subject, a predicate (which is our intentionality in action) and an object:

subject > predicate > object

As Husserl put it:

in perception something is perceived, in imagination something is imagined, in a statement something is stated, in love something is loved, in hate something is hated, in desire something is desired etc (Husserl 1900/1970, p. 554)

Phenomenology proceeds by considering each aspect of consciousness by setting aside any prejudice and bias through a process known as the '*Epoche*', or suspension, sometimes better understood as the act of 'bracketing' our assumptions. Phenomenology is a search for true observation, by clearing our minds of any obstacles that come from previous knowledge. In this search for truth, we remain aware that truth is complex and can be approached from many directions. Phenomenological observation can never make any claims to absolute truth.

What we aim to grasp in phenomenological therapy is the complex reality of what a person experiences and how this person makes sense of the world. There is an ongoing loop of verification, to remind us to check our observations against reality. In phenomenological therapy dialogue is the vehicle for this checking. In dialogue we refine our understanding of something until it fits the experience of several people rather than just that of one person. Gadamer (1960/Gadamer 1994), Buber (1923, Buber 1929), Scheler (1921, 1926), and Bohm (1996) all considered dialogue to be the best way of approximating truth in human matters. In phenomenological work dialogue is central. We are not silent, interpretive observers like analysts nor are we prescriptive, didactic teachers, as in cognitive-behavioral work. We aim for full presence and engagement.

All our observations about our clients need to be verified with them continuously, until a more and more true picture emerges. We aim for coherence and simplicity. Interpretation is always hermeneutic, i.e. it ensures that meanings correspond to the meaning that was intended by the subject of the experience. We do not translate clients' experiences into theoretical concepts or symptoms of pathology. We do not impose or suggest

meanings. It is the client who is the judge and jury. We look for the essence of their experience and know this has been found when they get an intuitive sense of rightness that feels whole, simple, consistent and familiar. We keep returning to the process of verification until this is achieved.

In entering into dialogue we aim for transparency and clarity, viewing each phenomenon from many different angles. We constantly keep clearing and polishing the lenses of our perception. We elucidate, throwing light where darkness is. We aim for greater perspective. Phenomenology helps us become aware and reflective about at least three levels of consciousness that we normally take for granted. We aim to achieve the *Wesensschau*, which is the direct observation of essences, bringing the specific and the universally true together. Husserl described a number of reductions and three of these are particularly relevant to therapy: the phenomenological, eidetic and transcendental reductions. We shall consider these before taking a brief look at the heuristic devices of the four worlds, the timeline and the emotional compass. We shall apply each of these elements to the experience of a fictitious client, Jane.

The Reductions

Husserl described three essential reductions, which are:

1. The *phenomenological* reduction, to clarify the process of consciousness itself (also known as the noesis or the cogitatio).
2. The *eidetic* reduction, to clarify the objects of consciousness (also known as the noemata or cogitationes).
3. The *transcendental* reduction to clarify the subject of consciousness (also known as the nous or cogito).

In therapeutic practice this means that we locate and filter out:

1. Our prejudice about the process of therapy.
2. Our prejudice about the things the client talks about.
3. Our prejudice about our own response to these things.

The principle of the double hermeneutic requires us to extend the same privilege to the client as well, to help her examine her prejudice on all these scores too. When I meet Jane, I engage with her as fully as possible, being as real as I can manage, observing my impact on her, whilst constantly checking in myself how I am relating and how this is different to other relationships I have been in therapeutically. I will also observe how Jane is relating and how she is with me and I will furthermore consider how our joint relationship is progressing and how she responds to things I say or do. I will ask myself continuously how Jane is making sense of these elements and will enquire about this. Lets look at how this works in practice.

Firstly the Phenomenological Reduction

Briefly this consists of:

1. Epoche
2. Description
3. Horizontalization
4. Equalization
5. Verification

I have described the process of phenomenological reduction in several of my books (van Deurzen 2010, 2012; van Deurzen and Adams 2011) in greater detail. The reduction focuses on the process of our conscious mind. It helps us sharpen our awareness of our different ways of perceiving, thinking and knowing. It calls us to be clearer about the way in which we are conscious. The Greek word *noesis* refers to the process of thought, which in Latin is known as the *cogitatio* or the thinking process. For Husserl this meant taking a fresh look at the intentionality we normally take for granted. We pay attention to our actual process of observation and experience. We do a double take. We stop ourselves. This does not mean we can get rid of our previous presumptions or that we un-think them or are able to un-know anything we already know. It only means that we take awareness of what is going on. We commit to the discipline of thinking about our thinking process and begin to see a lot more than we saw before. We take the trouble to watch ourselves doing the thinking, or in this case, we watch our own process of engagement with our client. When I meet Jane and say hello to her, I mentally watch myself falling into a particular mode of relationship, for instance I catch myself either admiring her or pitying her. I do not try to change this, I just observe it and reflect on its significance. Perhaps I catch myself trying to be a really great neutral therapist with Jane, which can be an equal hindrance to true understanding.

As we slow our mind down and pay attention to the process, we stop ourselves merely automatically doing what we are inclined to do, though we may continue to do it with awareness. Now we can begin to start describing carefully what is actually going on. We describe rather than explaining or interpreting. We embark upon a painstaking and repeated process of observation and description of these observations. This applies to the narrative of the client as much as to the narrative of the therapist about the client or in this case specifically about the therapeutic process. Jane's story about herself will change as I interact with it and she recounts it in different sessions. My views about Jane will similarly change dynamically as her being unfolds in front of me. Our joint narrative will evolve week after week as we keep correcting things we had not understood previously. This is slow careful work, which creates a new way of being. It has to be learnt.

There are some rules of thumb to help us do this.

1. Stick with *description* instead of analysing or explaining. Observe, note, watch, describe and withhold from jumping to conclusions. Repeat the same process patiently until what we see starts to shift shape and we realize we are beginning to see through the surface, to the essence. I will keep encouraging Jane to talk to me more about the things that matter to her, until they begin to be polished and find their right place. I will hear her repeated complaint that other people treat her badly and understand that this is her reality, even though it may not be the truth. She may eventually hear the bias in her own words as she is invited to observe it, over and over again.
2. Use the process of *horizontalization*: i.e. set your awareness so that it seeks out the limit of your vision at the horizon. Be aware of the limit of what you can see. Be aware of the particular perspective you hold and account for it. As Jane tells me of her sadness and loneliness, I see only as far as previous experiences of sadness and loneliness can take me. I need to keep describing to Jane what I understand her words to mean, so that she can correct me and take me beyond that horizon. She will, in this process also take herself beyond her own horizon of understanding. In dialogical exploration we both expand our understanding of what it means to be sad and lonely.
3. Value the process of *equalization*, bringing each element into view with equal emphasis, noting that this is hard to do since what is closest or loudest tends to initially seem more important. Rather than imposing my ideas of what is important in Jane's narrative, I will invite more details on many different aspects of it. In this way we establish a broad view of the situation rather than immediately falling into one particular narrow valley of understanding. The more I can keep a broad beam of light shining on Jane's experience the more she will realize that there is much more that she knows about her own reality than I do. She will become amazed at her own understanding and begin to expand her capacity for roaming around her world, instead of feeling trapped in it. Jane will freely remember many occasions when people treated her badly. Eventually she will contradict herself, or find memories of people treating her well.
4. Last but not least be disciplined about *verification*. Everything you observe is bound to hold some error and usually is an interpretation, one version of reality. So, check and check again that your observations fit reality. Keep correcting the picture that is emerging. As I speak with Jane I say things like: 'it seems to me that you are looking at this from a perspective of

passivity, rather than a perspective of possibility'. Jane may correct me by saying for instance 'the opposite is true, I am just constantly afraid of all these possibilities. They all involve other people getting ahead of me'. We can then explore some of the possibilities that frighten her. We can think about the ideas of 'getting ahead' or 'falling behind'. This may lead us to looking at destinations and directions to be taken. We are on our way to understanding better. Each time we discover new seams that still need exploring. The objective is to understand Jane's meanings. Some of these investigations will amaze and delight Jane, as she will get a feeling of the search being her adventure. She will feel less afraid and more engaged.

The Eidetic Reduction

This consists in brief of a consideration of:

1. Noemata or the objects of awareness
2. Adumbrations or Abschattungen
3. Wesensschau: looking for essences
4. Genetic or dynamic constitution
5. Universals

When we come to the eidetic reduction, we are dealing with the actual objects of our observations. The *noemata* of our intentionality, or the *cogitationes* of our thoughts, are the objects of consciousness that we are trying to explore. This is of course what sciences are most thorough about. They have learnt to carefully scrutinize and analyse the objects of our investigations and generally do this by making calibrated observations. In phenomenology we deal with it differently as we are looking at the objects of consciousness, rather than at the objects per se. When for instance we are looking at the ideas about home that Jane is bringing to the therapy, we do not want to know about the actual measurements of her house, we want to hear what each aspect of her house means to her personally. To apply the eidetic reduction to her observations about the world is to try to see it in the most accurate and genuine manner. We want to grasp what Jane truly believes to be the case, without trying to immediately correct or judge her. We draw out her authentic, intimate existence, rather than its outward appearances and objective qualities or quantities. We do not tear the client's views apart to see what they are composed of. We patiently collect them and wait until we are in a position to grasp the whole phenomenon. We aim to get a hold of what we observe, in order to comprehend and understand it in a deep way, rather than to merely handle it and pull it to pieces. The eidetic reduction inspired the whole field of Gestalt psychology. The German word *Gestalt*, or form or shape, is a good rendering of

the Greek word *eidos*, which means essential shape. Of course the word has led to other words and concepts such as the word 'idea' or the word 'ideal'. The eidetic reduction helps us appreciate a person's ideology, by collecting the essential connotations of things that represent the elemental qualities of their life. The eidetic reduction looks for the very spirit of what a person observes and experiences. It is to appreciate what makes things important or valuable to a person. Of course getting a hold of the *eidos* of something is to grasp it as a whole. This is usually the opposite of what scientific investigations achieve as they aim to analyse things by pulling them apart. Science looks for components, treating things (or people) as objects, which have to be analysed and divided into their smallest parts or characteristics. The scientific enterprise is executed in an I-It manner rather than in the holistic manner of a phenomenological eidetic reduction, which seeks to capture the meaning of what is under inspection and does this in an I-Thou respectful manner. We do this as follows:

1. *Profiling*, requires us to bear in mind that each thing has many different manifestations and comes to us under different guises, or different adumbrations. In working with Jane I invite her to give me many instances of the same thing. I need to be able to resonate with, or taste, Jane's experience. This means drawing her out about many different circumstances or situations. We cannot claim to have knowledge of anything that we have not experienced any length of time and from different angles and in various settings. In doing this we will inevitably come to realize that experience shifts over time. Jane may tell me of her fear in relation to authority figures, only to differentiate later between the teacher at her son's school and the headmistress at her daughter's school who relate to her differently. She may also have a very different experience with a neighbour she is in awe of or the meter reader who inspired her with terror. Slowly, in profiling many examples of what seems the same thing, it becomes clear how each situation is ontodynamically different and what makes it so.
2. Husserl describes the *Wesensschau*, or the seeing of essences as looking directly for the core of something, for the heart of the matter. Instead of being waylaid and distracted by the outward appearances, in various manifestations, we look to what is the steady internal coherence and core of the being of something. What is the real nub of the matter? What is the secret? What is the thing without which this would not be what it is? That is what we are asking ourselves. We try to resonate and get direct intuition of what it is we are trying to understand. We get into the spirit of it. We do not alienate ourselves from what we behold, but make

ourselves akin to it, so that we can do justice to it, apprehending it in its inward truth. This is a crucial quality to have as an existential therapist. To be able to see through a person towards their inner concern, preoccupation and yearning is to be able to communicate and make a difference. With Jane, the very sharpness of my attention to what it is we are witnessing together begins to loosen her own sense of constriction in relation to other people. No, it is not just a fear of authority. No, it is not just a habit of thinking that men are superior. No, it is not a leftover of being treated badly by her father. It is much more intense and infinitely more specific and interesting. She is trying to find out where to place herself in relation to all these people. She is fearful of all of them, but only until she recognizes what they want from her. She discovers that she is fine as soon as she has a role to play in relation to another person, a distinct role, that has a purpose. Now we uncover a new reality, which tells us that Jane is lost in life. She is never sure where she fits into the picture. She is searching for a path and thinks other people should tell her which road to take. But now she begins to play with the idea that perhaps she can find a path of her own, in all these different situations.

3. In this process it helps to remember that things are *genetic* rather than static. The essence or the *eidōs* of something or someone is never fully manifest in one second, in one moment, but always reveals itself slowly over time and changes. Each being is dynamic, or as Husserl said, is genetically constituted, which means that the full potential of a person or an event evolves in time. The nature of something is only slowly realized and revealed. Essences are not fixed, they are merely the core of something that is in progress. Everything develops and is eminently variable and unstable, until it has found a pattern. Life is in movement and phenomenology addresses life rather than matter. Perhaps the most predictable constant of human existence is that it is in flux. Human beings are situational and respond differently in different circumstances. To diagnose someone and tie them down with a label is to freeze them and do them disfavoured. We need to open up their chances of evolving and changing. We need to get to know their capacity and possibilities as well as their actuality and the past contexts that have led them here. Jane quickly discovers that she feels more at ease when she can see that she is searching. She is no longer someone who is lost or incompetent, she is now an explorer. She can differentiate the different challenges different people pose for her. She can learn about her ability to respond in many different ways. She is not statically anxious or phobic. These were temporary,

transitional states. She can experiment with approaching, joining or avoiding others. She can learn to be many different things. As soon as she is finding out about the world, she is no longer just passive, not just caught in it. She is active. She is on the move. As soon as she re-establishes a more dynamic experimental way of life, her previous symptoms of distress shift dramatically to the background. She regains confidence in her right to be alive and change. We have de-pathologized her view of herself. She is human again. She has possibilities.

4. *Universals* can now also be observed. By collecting several sketches of the same situation or the same experience over time it becomes possible to eliminate aspects that were momentary and fleeting. A picture begins to emerge of the universal qualities we observe in action. Husserl was very keen on universals to counterbalance the idea of genetic constitution. There is something compelling about beginning to grasp what the essential universals behind the phenomena under observation are. Husserl was more interested in such long-term findings than in anything else. With Jane this search for her universal values is very satisfying. She begins to accumulate knowledge about things that matter to her as well as understanding which things she is good at. She is great at being playful for instance and terrified when she tells herself that everything is so important that it has to happen in a set way. She learns about her own priorities, for instance she learns that it matters enormously to be with people who enjoy being with her and who appreciate her capacity for playfulness, creativity and care. She starts to feel stronger as she formulates these ideas and stops thinking other people define all the rules and should be in command of her.

The Transcendental Reduction

This consists in brief of:

1. Paying attention to the cogito or nous: the subject of awareness
2. Focusing on the transcendental ego: the place of observation of the world
3. Overcoming solipsism by connecting to inter-subjectivity
4. Finding the horizon of our intentionality
5. Centering on the self as point zero
6. Transcendental inter-subjectivity allows universal connections

As we progress with the phenomenological and eidetic reductions we come to see how our bias as therapist can be

both obstructive and facilitative in the therapeutic process. We face the challenge of working more with our personal bias. This was something invaluable in Husserl's approach and is an important part of the phenomenological process. It requires self-reflection. To turn to the transcendental reduction is to turn to the *cogito* or thinking subject itself. In Greek we may term this the *nous*, or the mind, the thinking subject of our intentionality. This subject is as biased and distorted as everything else under observation and we need practical rules to deal with it.

1. We seek to uncover the *transcendental ego*, which is that aspect of consciousness that is beyond our social ego experience. This applies to Jane as much as it applies to the therapist, as they both gradually see that their initial views are corrected. Jane is no longer that rather pathetic, frightened, incompetent person she thought she was, nor is she the passive and discontented, protesting client she briefly was in the therapist's mind. Each learns to respect the other's capacity for interacting in a truth-finding manner and in that process new people emerge. Jane becomes more self-assured and the therapist becomes more respectful. It is hard to say which of these happens first, though initially they may each feel humiliated by the mistakes they have made in the process of dialoguing together. Both at some point were probably inclined to pin their discomfort on the other's failings. It is important to transcend such pettiness and not hold it against oneself or the other but go beyond it. Instead of being concerned about our personal motivations or critical observations, we dig a little deeper. This allows us to reach the place in our inner selves where reflection happens. We become aware of our creative capacity. When Jane and I achieve this, we can laugh about misunderstandings. I can say: 'I did you an injustice there, seeing you as you were last year, when you have gone so far beyond that', and we can delight in her progress. She can say: 'you have no idea how suspicious I used to be of you as a therapist. I imagined you wanted to control me and outsmart me. I know now though how we explore things together, side-by-side. I feel so much freer being with you now'.
2. While some have criticised Husserl for going into *solipsism* at this point, making it sound as if consciousness needs to be studied as a very separate and personal experience, this was not his objective. He wanted to go beyond personality, character and psychology. He wanted to pinpoint the actual capacity for consciousness, which is always shared as a universal and brings us together instead of isolating us. This is often demonstrated in therapy. I count it as a sign of progress when I feel genuinely as if I am

learning new things from working with my client. Jane and each other client, willing to candidly explore their difficulties help me to open windows and doors on existence I could never have discovered without them. They of course feel likewise. The net effect is one of global transcending of personal limitations.

3. It is in this respect that Husserl began to speak of *intersubjectivity*, by which he meant the bond between people that makes each of us like an element, or beam of the total universal capacity for awareness. Our personal consciousness only comes into its full reality when it joins with this broader bundle of light that is consciousness in general. It is our connectivity that sheds most light on reality. We are tied together and can never experience anything in a solipsistic manner, unless we deliberately keep ourselves separate. Husserl saw being part of consciousness as essential. Because of this he was very critical of Heidegger's early work (1927) in which his pupil described *Mitsein* as problematic, encouraging people to come out of inauthentic falling in with others to stand robustly alone in authentic contemplation of the end of possibility. For Husserl our very capacity for self-reflection brings us together with others towards the transcendental ego. The objective is to unite and rise above separateness as we aim to apprehend a greater truth than we can achieve alone. When I work with Jane, or any other client, it is in order to discover truth, a truth just as valid for me as for her or any other person. That is the standard by which the work is measured. As long as I fall into superiority or my clients into dependency or counter-dependence, I know we have not got to the core of it. We are not yet collaborating and transcending.
4. For Husserl it remained important to account for our own centre of consciousness and not lose this in the movement of transcendence. For the centre is not only a limitation, it is also a focal point. It is, what he called the *point zero* of our experience and it matters to keep checking that all of our observations come centrally from that focal point of experience in ourselves. If we feel that we get pushed out of shape by other people we engage with, it is time to gather ourselves around that centre again. If we feel we are bending over too much to remain true to our method we may become alienated from our own reality and lose our foothold. It is crucial that our vision is clear and it can only remain so if we hold on to our point zero, and remain aware of our point of view and perspective. We need to keep checking with our own sense of reality as therapist make sure our clients find what feels right and true to them. When Jane feels able to relate to herself in this

centring manner, she no longer worries about fitting in with my perspective, or anyone else's for that matter. Finding the point zero goes with finding a settled kind of peace in oneself. As long as I feel keen to please, or frightened to offend I have not found the safety of my own centre.

5. On the one hand we keep checking that things make internal sense to ourselves on the other hand we keep getting feedback about how it feels and seems to the other. The therapeutic project is existential and explorative. It leads to people feeling at ease with their own life philosophy and purpose. This is more easily done when there is dialogue. This is particularly true in couple work (van Deurzen and Iacovou 2013) or in work with groups. It is in the tension between different foci of ideas and reality that we are likely to find the truth of the matter. This is how transcendental inter-subjectivity is achieved, with on-going creative tension and with a sense that human consciousness is clearest when it hangs together.

Working with Space in the Four Worlds

While we have viewed the main parameters of the phenomenological framework, it is worth mentioning that there are a number of other tools we can use in this process. One is that of working with a person's use of space on four dimensions, especially by paying attention to the way they deal with the inevitable existential tensions on each of those dimensions. Another method is to tune into feelings or affectedness. Finally there is the phenomenological process of working with time. We shall now consider each of these briefly. For fuller descriptions please refer to *Everyday Mysteries* (van Deurzen 2010, 2012) or *Existential Counselling and Psychotherapy in Practice* (van Deurzen 2012). Structural existential analysis has many aspects and many layers, and we do not necessarily apply all of its capacities in each session. What we always do is to be clear and systematic in our observations.

Working with space in a structured manner is one way of seeing to it that we cover all bases of a person's actual existence. Human space is multidimensional. Human beings move and act in relation to a physical world, in which they move forwards towards things, or backwards away from things, where they interact with the material world in specific ways, creating a particular kind of intertwinement and interaction. They also move in an interpersonal, inter-subjective way, where they engage with others or disengage from them. Where they open to some people and close off to others, where they try to connect with some and disconnect from others at the same time as being welcomed by some and rejected by others. They also

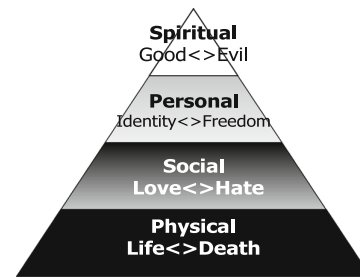


Fig. 1 Dimensions of existence

have the experience of an inner world, where they can retreat into a sense of personal privacy and intimacy and they can be more or less open or closed to that and in which they can move in time, by recollecting the past, focusing on the present or imagining and anticipating the future. They also have a world of ideas, or a spiritual world, where they create meanings and organize their understanding of and purpose in the world. To pay attention to these different dimensions will provide a first framework of organization of the data we collect. We need to learn to observe carefully and systematically at which level the studied phenomena take place and what movement the person is making in relation to this. Are they located in the physical dimension, the social dimension, the personal dimension or the spiritual dimension? And if so, what are the tensions, the desires and fears at each level? And how do all these layers affect each other and weave together?

The four relational layers can be represented in many different ways. We can show the layers and their tensions in a hierarchical fashion, with the main conflicts that we have to approach in each dimension (Fig. 1).

This representation is a simple heuristic device to facilitate our observations and understanding of where each person is struggling. But we should never mistake the map for the territory. Human existence is a lot more complex than this and we face challenges on every level at once, and all dimensions are woven and knotted together.

The tensions of life are multiple and manifold, but they are also quite predictable and universal. The below diagram gives us a bit more of a framework to help us find our way in relation to the challenges we encounter. It is possible to experience challenges as contradictions, or as conflicts, or dilemmas, but we can also learn to recognize them as polarities and creative tensions. The paradoxical nature of life is pretty obvious (van Deurzen 1997). None of us can avoid having to deal with both sides of the equation and we get better at living when we stop trying to avoid the negatives and recognize that dealing with negatives effectively is the only way to experience positives. Learning to balance between opposites to find enjoyment and satisfaction in that dynamic gravity is the dialectical way forward.

Fig. 2 Paradoxes of human existence

World	Umwelt	Mitwelt	Eigenwelt	Uberwelt
Physical	Nature: Life/ Death	Things: Pleasure/ Pain	Body: Health/ Illness	Cosmos: Harmony/ Chaos
Social	Society: Love/ Hate	Others: Dominance/ Submission	Ego: Acceptance/ Rejection	Culture: Belonging/ Isolation
Personal	Person: Identity/ Freedom	Me: Perfection/ Imperfection	Self: Integrity/ Disintegration	Consciousness: Confidence/ Confusion
Spiritual:	Infinite: Good/ Evil	Ideas: Truth/ Untruth	Soul: Meaning/ Futility	Conscience: Right/ Wrong

Facing negatives is an important part of therapy. Discovering positives flows directly from this. As far as Jane was concerned, she felt initially that life had singled her out for bad treatment, and she desperately tried to get away from the negativity of her fate by hiding away and hoping for improvement. She was desperately seeking pleasure and comforts for herself and her children, but as a single parent came to fear all the threats that might oppose that objective. So she became more and more scared. She was also desperately seeking love, but not expecting to find it. She despaired of her children's love when they misbehaved and expected all men to treat her badly. This was one of the reasons she was so fearful of other people: she was terrified that they would reject and hate her, so that she would become yet further isolated and annihilated. Jane also anxiously aimed to establish her identity by various means, such as dressing provocatively in short, tight clothes, only to feel bad about herself when other people criticized or ridiculed her for it. She wanted to be good, but often felt that her children knew her better than that and mocked her, as they called her names or scorned her. She was caught in the contradictions of existence by trying to avoid the challenges and opt for what was 'best'. Getting to know a more complete map of living helped her find courage to face her fears.

It helped Jane to go into more detail on each of the aspects of life she was struggling with. She became expert at making daily observations and then looking for the ways she had tried to get away with not facing her challenges.

In the more complex representation of sixteen possible ways of being on four dimensions of existence the paradoxes of life become more obvious. This helps us think about the more ordinary dynamics of day-to-day living that make so many demands on us that we often get confused about it. Nevertheless we may also find that we overlook

some aspects of life, where we are quite able to hold our own already (Fig. 2).

Jane had problems in almost each of these categories, as she systematically approached life from the perspective that she had to try to avoid difficulties, making things as good and ideal as she could do for herself and her children. She soon began to see that the extent to which she disallowed any negatives was the extent to which she became paralysed and frightened of existence. When she could see the world as a place to enjoy rather than endure challenges, as these would help her get better at living, her mood lifted.

Working with Time and Noting the Direction of the Life-World

The next layer of phenomenological structural work is to consider the element of time, which is another dimension that runs through all human lives and needs to be plotted in any therapy. The timeline of a person's experience is eminently important and dictates the direction in which a person's thinking is proceeding. Phenomenologists have made many observations about time and the most well known of these is Heidegger in his magnum opus *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1927). His idea was that human beings are thrown in time and are projected towards the end in a distant future. We measure everything in life by change and the passing of time, because we ourselves are always no longer what we were and not yet what we will be. We create different narratives about the past if we aim to forget, remember or re-experience. The objective is to own our experience so as to learn from it. Similarly in the present, we can absent ourselves or truly be in the moment and represent what is in a full manner. We can distance ourselves from possible futures or resolutely anticipate their possibility as well as the end of possibility in death.

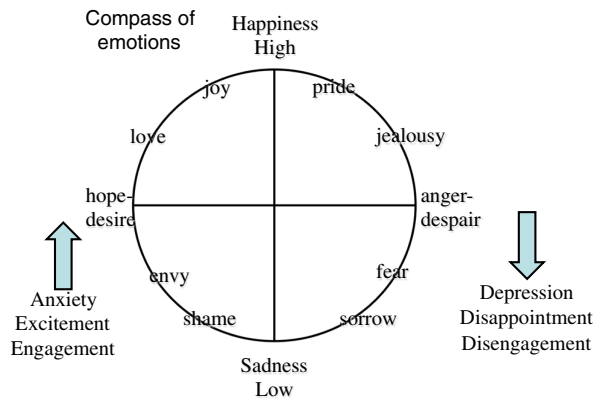


Fig. 3 Compass of human emotions

Heidegger spoke of the Ec-stasies of time, where we literally stand out of ourselves in past, present and future, in what he called the moment of vision, the *Augenblick*, in which we stand above time, in the blink of an eye, temporarily overseeing life in an experience of authentic presence in the situation.

Working with the Movement of Emotion, Mood, Attunement, Values and Actions

The same can be said for focusing on the issue of emotion, which are so essential in psychotherapy, as all human life happens in a mood and with a certain attunement to the world in which we find ourselves. Heidegger had a lot to say about affectedness, or *Befindlichkeit*, which is the way in which I find myself in relation to the world. Attunement is elemental and happens in a preverbal manner. Emotions are always already there when we become aware of our connection to the world. Sartre spoke of values as partridges springing up in the world as soon as we act in it. Indeed we cannot live or exist without uncovering these values and we cannot stop feeling the emotions they evoke in us. The movement of our lives follows that of our attraction to the things we value and our repulsion from the things we dislike. Being able to see clearly through the lens of our emotions to the values they relate to is particularly important. The model of the compass of emotions can help us understand this connection between emotion and value. It shows us where the person is moving from being on top of their value to the bottom of their despair. The model is simple, but needs some practice for full understanding (van Deurzen 2010, 2012). The basic compass of emotions, below, shows the top of the compass, indicating the magnetic north of happiness, which occurs when a person is united with their value. The bottom of the compass indicates the point of greatest loss, when the value is forsaken

or out of reach. The movement around the compass is clockwise, with the mid points between ownership of value and loss of value leading to anger, and the regaining of hope of achieving value leading to desire and love (Fig. 3).

Jane had lived most of her life dreaming of eternal happiness, but finding herself, in reality always in fear, sorrow and sadness, dropping away from her imagined Eldorado to a disappointed place at the bottom of the compass. Each time she had a little courage to try again, she would falter in shame, feeling incapable of achieving anything of value. It was hard for her to start believing she could slowly build a more realistic life for herself. Tolerating the anxiety of finding new energy helped her to set off on a new track. Her objective was to dedicate herself to a clear ideology of becoming a more loving and self-loving person. Jane became much more joyful as she allowed her talents to develop. Her creativity flourished and she also began to value her own courage in moving forwards, in spite, and often because of challenges. She found that as she became stronger, her faith in life grew equally and this allowed her to withstand inevitable pressures and tensions.

Final Remarks

Existential therapy is so the stronger as it bases itself on a firm foundation of phenomenological work and in particular on the systematic approach of structural existential analysis. There are many therapists of different orientations who have taken the trouble to learn these methods. There are analysts, CB therapists, humanistic and positive psychotherapists, person-centred therapists and logotherapists, whose work has become more efficient in integrating these methods into their usual ways of working. You do not have to opt for being an existential-phenomenologist to gain the benefits of building your therapeutic work around a clear philosophy.

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