



Phenomenology in Person-Centred Counselling

The philosophy of individual experience

Carl Rogers, the 'founding father' of humanistic counselling embraced Phenomenology person centred counselling when moving away from the pessimistic views of human nature put forward by Sigmund Freud. Who believed that the human condition was involved in a constant battle between the Id Ego and Super-ego. Rogers' Person-Centred theory is based on what he described as The Phenomenal field. Hence perceptions of taste, sound and how we experience the world are as individual as ourselves.



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What is Phenomenology?

It is an approach in philosophy which concentrates on the study of consciousness and how we experience the world, it focuses on:

- Individual perception
- Conscious experience
- Developing meanings from our perceptions
- Frame of reference

A brief description of phenomenological movement will make it clear why Rogers theory and practice has been linked in this way. Developed at the beginning of the 19th Century by German philosophers Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. They believed that **reality** consisted of objects and events, which they called '**phenomena**' which represent our **conscious** perception of reality.

How did it influence Rogers' thinking?

Rogers based his theory of personality outlined in his 1951 book *Client Centred Therapy* on the earlier work of Snygg & Coombs 1949 book *Individual Behaviour: A New frame of reference for psychology*.

In 1951 Rogers acknowledged the connection between the Person-Centred approach and phenomenology stating, '*his theory of personality and behaviour was 'basically phenomenological in character' (Rogers cited in Douglas, P190)*. Clearly demonstrating the Phenomenology Person Centred Counselling overlap.

Rogers further expanded on his phenomenological view of personality in his 1961 book *On Becoming a Person*. He clearly stated his theoretical ideas of personality in this observation;

"Experience is, for me, the highest authority. The touchstone of validity is my own experience. No other person's ideas, and none of my own ideas, are as authoritative as my experience. It is to experience that I must return again and again, to discover a closer approximation to truth as it is in the process of becoming in me. Neither the Bible nor the prophets -- neither Freud nor research -- neither the revelations of God nor man -- can take precedence over my own direct experience.

My experience is not authoritative because it is infallible. It is the basis of authority because it can always be checked in new primary ways. In this way its frequent error or fallibility is always open to correction." (Rogers Cited in Kirschenbaum P 25)

As we can see from the quote above, Rogers clearly linked Phenomenology Person Centred Counselling together.

How phenomenology links to Person-Centred theory

Rogers developed his psychological ideas which included '**The Internal Locus of evaluation**' and '**Organismic valuing**'. In 1953 he published his theory of personality known as the **Nineteen Propositions**.

The first of the 19 observations make a very clear link to phenomenology and its ideas of how we perceive the world:

1. *All individuals (organisms) exist in a continually changing world of experience (**phenomenal field**) of which they are the center.*

In other words, **our own experience is our reality, in any given moment of time.**

Why is an understanding of phenomenology important?

Because it informs how a person-centred therapist works with clients:-

- View of themselves and others
- Experience of feeling
- Moment by moment experiencing
- Edge of awareness material

It also worth remembering that Person Centred therapy **relies on the** counsellors **ability to be empathic, congruent and non-judgmental**, sometimes referred to as the **Core Conditions**. When used effectively the client feels that someone else can experience how they feel and be validated by the experience. which is how Phenomenology Person Centred Counselling is experienced.

References

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Cooper, M. Et al (2007) *The Handbook of Person-Centred Psychotherapy and Counselling*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

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