

Experiential Theory: Psychotherapy's Well-Kept Secret

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“This is a healing. I haven’t allowed myself to heal. I didn’t understand it. I mean I heard what people said when they said this, but I didn’t understand it – until now.” - Independent filmmaker

At significant moments in sessions, we pay attention to the nuances of our client’s experiential process as it is conveyed through their verbal and nonverbal communication; and we rely on our own experiential process for our vital clinical intuition. We listen through these levels to grasp what our client is experiencing. It is inconceivable to consider the practice of psychotherapy without paying careful attention to experiential process.

But what is meant by experiential process? Are there different levels of experiential process? What does it mean when we say that someone is “too much in their head” or, for that matter, too much in their feelings? What makes one type of psychotherapy really experiential and another less so? Does experiential process have its own natural properties? If such properties exist, how can we know them? These are philosophical and theoretical questions of great value to clinicians.

This article is the first of a series introducing you to Eugene Gendlin’s philosophy of experiencing, its theoretical principles, and its clinical applications. As a philosopher and phenomenologist, Gendlin makes a rare contribution to our work because he addresses ontological questions about the nature of experiencing itself. While a growing number of clinicians, from different schools of psychotherapy, know the clinical value of his experiential focusing method, the philosophy itself is less well known. Ahead of its time, it can now be seen as providing an intellectual holding environment for some of the latest developments in intersubjectivity theory, self-psychology, trauma work, and what is now called the philosophy of the implicit.

My plan in this introduction is to give a brief background to Gendlin’s thought and then to show you how his conceptualization of the natural “laws” of experiential process have direct application to our work with clients.

Gendlin is a philosopher who collaborated with Carl Rogers when they met in 1952 at the University of Chicago. Gendlin’s first major work, *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning* (1962), introduced the experiential dimension, and he

went on to say that, based on his research (see below, re: The Experiencing Scale), client-centered therapy was not enough. Rogers acknowledged this, citing Gendlin's contributions to his own article called "On a process conception of psychotherapy" (Rogers, 1958, p. 142). Gendlin went beyond the person-centered approach to describe his view of experiencing in what now is called the implicit dimension of meaning and "implicit knowing."

Gendlin and his collaborators discovered that clients who showed no progress in therapy didn't seem to have a capacity to "refer inward" in a particular way. Gendlin designed a way to capture and teach this natural process to anyone interested in working with their inner experiencing. In order to test the validity of the focusing method, Gendlin and Hendricks developed The Experiencing Scale, a statistically reliable method of measuring levels of experiencing. In the last 20 years, experiential focusing has been cited as an excellent example of a microunit of naturally occurring human change process (Patterns of Change), that can be worked with across most approaches to psychotherapy.

Consider this: You have within you—"beneath" your everyday practical use of language—another dimension, an inner language, that is an imagistic dialogue between you and your immediate experiencing. It is you speaking to yourself (and listening to yourself) in your own code. Gendlin calls it the "zigzag" between the everyday use of language and the way we may actually hold our experiencing in a "bodily felt" way.

We start the process when some situation in our lives—something we "find ourselves in"—feels stuck or painful. The problem beckons to us in a bodily way. We want to move into the place where meanings can reconstellate. To touch into this realm, we sit quietly, eyes lowered, with attention inside. We let form how exactly the situation touches us, how it is meaningful to us, but in an implicit way, not in words. You might say that It finds a way to let itself develop explicitly.

By staying still yet alert, our inner sensing seems to order itself; bodily felt senses (to be defined in the next article) carry within them a palpable sense of significance. As we let them come to us (we cannot in fact go after them!) they prioritize themselves. In a way, they tell us what we need to be attending to. As we hold them in our awareness, we let our words speak directly from our immediate sense of them. And, as this happens, something starts to happen, however subtle. Something starts to dawn on us. Our usual way of holding a situation starts to open—but it's not only the situation. It is the way we "hold" the situation. We notice a palpable change. This was a good moment in a good therapy session.

If the above description seems familiar to you, that is probably because you have access to your own creative process; you refer to it without needing to know how it might work. The process has its own palpable efficacy. If you are taken by the process, Gendlin's philosophy in action, you might over time find yourself "living the practice."

Gendlin's worldview has helped me to sit with the pauses, stuck places, and moments of uncertainty that are intrinsic to life, including to my life's work as a psychotherapist. His view of the human universe lends a beauty to the process of meaning making, helping our clients and ourselves stay alive to the creative process that makes good therapy.

This first attempt to describe the microprocess of experiencing will be refined in further articles. In my next article, I will use clinical examples to demonstrate Gendlin's principles so that you can see them in action.

References:

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