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Book Review

Embodied Enquiry

Les Todres (2007). *Embodied Enquiry: Phenomenological Touchstones for Research, Psychotherapy and Spirituality*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

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by **Sally Borbasi**

Les Todres is a 'philosophically oriented' clinical psychologist and Professor of Qualitative Research and Psychotherapy at Bournemouth University, UK. In his recently published book, *Embodied Enquiry: Phenomenological Touchstones for Research, Psychotherapy and Spirituality*, Todres writes about the influence the phenomenological tradition has had on his academic and professional thinking and practice. With the Foreword written by Steen Halling, the book is a compilation of Todres's scholarship published over the last sixteen years and re-presents his thoughts, ideas and beliefs about the need for a philosophical world view that pursues the tasks of embodied enquiry at a time of technological progress in which self and other are too easily objectified. Drawing as fully on his experience/s as teacher, researcher and practitioner as on his reading of influential scholars in the field, the book is divided into three overlapping sections pertaining to research methodology; psychotherapy and spirituality respectively. The central theme linking the sections of the book's narrative is the notion of the lived body as a way of knowing and being - one that enables an embodied approach to enquiry. Taking an embodied approach allows not only for a deeper philosophical appreciation of what it means to be human, but it can also be applied as a practice that has tangible implications for research, psychotherapy and spirituality. Each of the book's sections provides examples of such application.

Part I of the book deals with research methodology and addresses four areas/tasks that Todres believes underpin aesthetic and embodied practices in qualitative research. These comprise the aesthetic dimension of qualitative description, what it means to understand, truth-telling in qualitative research, and writing phenomenological-psychological descriptions. Drawing on the ideas of key scholars in the field, Todres argues for qualitative research as an embodied methodological practice: one that pays due regard to the aesthetic dimensions of producing interpretive descriptions that are "faithful to a meaningful human world" (p. 13). In addition, he refers to the need to consider the level of participation of the experience being grounded in terms of the nature of the experiencing - its absoluteness or relativity. To produce good rich qualitative interpretations requires understanding or meaning-making, which, he states, drawing on the work of Gendlin, is a bodily inclusive hermeneutic cycle. Todres discusses the notion of "essence/s" and favours Gendlin's idea of "authentic productive linguistic gatherings" (p. 29) as a means to share understanding about experience. Todres's view is that language and other ways of human meaning-making cannot adequately summarise the lifeworld, in that there is always a 'more than' element to lived experience. However, assuming an embodied approach to enquiry, making use of the lived body as a 'place' where intimate understanding of both experience and language happens, gives rise to new horizons and meanings; the body can access the

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'more than words can say'. Gendlin's work - drawing on the lived body, the lifeworld and language - is the touchstone for the central theme of this book: in highlighting the primacy of the body and its close relationship to language, Gendlin "forges a continuity in which knowing is both an embodied and a languaged process" (p. 34). Todres's discourse on the bodily complexity of truth-telling in qualitative research raises questions for qualitative researchers which he usefully attempts to answer through practical application to case study. He ends the section with acclamation of Gendlin's philosophical writings as substance for the position/s he argues. This part of the book concludes with an exploration of writing phenomenological-psychological descriptions with regard to 'structure' and 'texture', with reference to his own PhD work by way of insightful illustration.

Part II of the book focuses on psychotherapy and what Todres calls "embodying complex identity". The section explores the idea of humanising forces, including phenomenological methodology and psychotherapy, to remedy a situation that Todres sees psychology has created in dehumanising individuals so they are regarded as objects, like other objects, to be fitted normatively into the world. Through application of his research methodology, Todres provides illustration for his points of argument. At the end of his analysis, he reaches the view that therapeutic self insight "is not the fundamental point of psychotherapy; it is more a means to an end, and points to an experience of 'more'. It is this experience of 'being more than' or of 'being as possibility' that is the essential power of psychotherapy" (p. 73). The chapter ends with a summary of how the existential-phenomenological method and psychotherapy in turn avoid the depersonalising forces that tend to arise from the way we are defined in a technological culture. As a further component of Part II, in chapter 6 Todres presents four emphases of interaction (modes of being), as a "way of languaging our everyday capacity for human interaction" (p. 89), that he believes assist psychotherapists to 'be present' during contact with clients. These four modes are: attentive being-with, focusing being-with, interactive being-with, and invitational being-with. He goes on to describe a training model for psychotherapists based on self awareness of each mode. In the following chapter, he provides a compelling case study in which he communicates the quality of phenomenological process through description of a psychotherapy session. Part II draws to a close with a discussion that addresses the complexity of self in an era of globalisation and what it means for the relevance of psychotherapy, concluding with an exploration of the ways in which the philosophical writings of Martin Heidegger and Medard Boss offer an understanding of the human realm and its grounding in Being to

inform psychotherapy. Todres shapes his argument through the articulation of an existential stance he refers to as "belonging to freedom-wound", which comprises a number of emphases, namely: a focus on freedom; a focus on vulnerability; embracing ambiguity; and embracing the embodiment of a human kind of openness.

Part III of the book consists of four chapters that extend the notion of freedom-wound into the realm of spirituality, attempting to show how a phenomenologically-oriented psychology can influence the tension between psychological and spiritual levels of discourse to ultimately locate human embodiment as the integrating 'place' where both human vulnerability and spiritual freedom can take place. Chapters 10 and 11 focus on the nature and potential of the psychological and spiritual freedoms that may be given to human existence and draw on the work of Martin Heidegger and the Zen tradition. In his work, Todres draws implications for psychotherapeutic orientations including greater flexibility or liberation and understanding around self-insight. While some of his ideas are not easy to grasp, it is helpful that he provides illustration from his own work and that of other scholars to clarify certain points. Chapter 12 explores the concept of existential vulnerability as a key component of human spirituality, in contrast to 'narcissism' that seeks to achieve omnipotence through self-sufficiency and exclusive self-love. As an alternative to narcissism, Todres proposes an existential achievement symbolised as 'soulful space', in which he suggests human spirituality can be provided with a creative 'wound' that acts as a foundation for interpersonal empathy and care - "a 'spaciousness' in which vulnerability is not avoided, but rather, embraced" (p. 162). Throughout his in-depth - and, indeed, at times, rather complex - philosophical analyses, Todres is looking to provide a humanising framework or frameworks from which psychotherapists can draw inspiration/insight. All of this is in an effort to enhance mental health and human functioning and thus avoid depersonalising forces in a world in which, he says, increasingly individuals are seeking help for the so-called 'meaninglessness' and 'deadness' of their lives because of the lack of vitality inherent in a world obsessed by the objectification of self and other. The final chapter of this section focuses on the growing field of Transpersonal Psychology, arguing for its foundations to become more philosophically based in order to accommodate ambiguity - which concept is then explicated in the remainder of the chapter.

Chapter 14 provides a summary of the main ideas posited throughout the book, and does this by elaborating on four constituents of embodied enquiry, each one the subject of a separate section, again

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underscored by the writings of elites in the field of phenomenology. In ending the book, Todres reflects on how such embodied enquiry can reframe the purposes of qualitative research methodology, psychotherapy and spirituality, and does this through the respective notions of empathic understanding, a bodily grounded yet flexible personal identity, and meeting mystery. This is an excellent chapter in terms of drawing this collection of work to a close. For the less philosophically erudite reader, this chapter will be especially accessible, as it is more immediately intelligible than the preceding chapters in Part III, while for others it will bring satisfactory closure.

This book is written for the discipline of psychology and, within that, academics and practitioners in the field of psychotherapy. In its entirety it is not a book for beginners. However, parts of it might be useful for the novice to dip into, particularly Part I. The book contains highly developed material that will be useful for qualitative researchers in related fields and higher degree-by-research students wishing to learn more about phenomenology and, indeed, psychotherapy.

Essentially the book is a philosophical treatise with practical application. However, in order to make it applicable, one has first to understand the theoretical/philosophical constructs on which it is based. Readers without some kind of philosophical background will thus not find it easy reading, particularly Part 3, which is deeply philosophical. Nevertheless, for psychotherapists, with or without a philosophical background, the book is important, as it adds to the body of knowledge underpinning their discipline and has huge potential for bringing about change in psychotherapeutic practice. For every reader, this book should present a wealth of material for thought and will undoubtedly act as a catalyst for on-going scholarship.

Finally, it has to be said that this review cannot possibly do justice to a book that represents half a lifetime of scholarship by a man who is unarguably a scholar in his field. Readers of the *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology* will appreciate and enjoy the intellectual richness resonating throughout this beautifully crafted piece of work.

About the Author

Professor Sally Borbasi is a registered nurse and has extensive teaching and research experience in the tertiary sector.



Currently a professor in the School of Nursing and Midwifery at Griffith University (Logan campus) in Queensland, Australia, where she has recently been seconded to the Deputy Vice Chancellor's office to work on learning and teaching related issues, Professor Borbasi has been involved in the development, teaching and co-ordination of various undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, including Australia's first nursing professional doctorate, at tertiary institutions throughout the country, including the University of Sydney in NSW and, in South Australia, the newly established Department of Clinical Nursing at the University of Adelaide, as well as Flinders University.

Professor Borbasi has a particular interest in qualitative research design, particularly within a phenomenological paradigm, and, in addition to serving on the editorial board of the *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, has recently taken on the role of regional editor for the *International Journal of Qualitative Methodology*. With her clinical background in disability and acute-care of the critically ill, her research interests cover a wide range of issues around health care delivery, including the experience of people with lymphoedema, end-of-life decision making in patients with heart failure, care of patients with dementia in acute settings, and quality of life for people with a disability. Widely published, she has also presented invited and keynote papers at a number of national and international conferences, and has co-authored a textbook for beginning researchers, the 2nd edition of which is due to be launched in 2008.