



The views expressed in the following review are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the journal editorial board or management. [Editor-in-Chief]

Book Review

Psychotherapy and Phenomenology

Ian Rory Owen (2006). *Psychotherapy and Phenomenology: On Freud, Husserl and Heidegger*. New York: iUniverse.

Soft Cover (352 pages) ISBN: 13: 978 0 59541 752 0

by **Rex van Vuuren**

What happens when two people meet and engage in a meaningful conversation, specifically in psychotherapy? This question has perennially engaged psychology and psychotherapy since its beginnings. Ian Rory Owen's book entitled *Psychotherapy and Phenomenology: On Freud, Husserl and Heidegger* is another work which attempts to respond to the complexities of the events, experiences and meanings which arise between a psychotherapist and a client.

In this densely written work, Owen tries to respond to a gap in the theory on psychotherapy: the lack of theoretical justification and coherence with respect to lived experience and the skills for practising psychotherapy. Owen bases his work on the conviction that the theoretical justification and accountability of psychological meaning are necessary (p. xvii). By situating, framing and articulating the psychotherapeutic relationship through a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, Owen wants to contribute to our *theoretical understanding* of sense-making in psychotherapy. He is convinced that phenomenology plays a significant role in making theory refer to conscious mental phenomena. Through more precise formulations of identifiable phenomena, Owen's work aims to change our understanding of what happens when a psychotherapist interprets and a client grasps a psychological meaning in talking and action therapies - and, in his own words, thus "to understand how meaning is public for more than one person" (p. 30).

The text is divided into five parts. A rationale is given for each part and every chapter begins with an aim or purpose for the chapter. Part I sets the tone and scene through an introduction followed by a detailed discussion of the "naturalistic attitude", which needs to be distinguished from the "natural attitude" - beliefs adopted from science which include the belief in the independent existence of what is given in experience. Owen later defines the naturalistic attitude as the mistake of viewing "the natural part of the whole of human being as entirely representative of the biopsychosocial whole" - an attitude and interpretation that focuses exclusively on "non-mental being" (p. 101). Part I ends with a move towards a formalisation of a hermeneutics for psychological understanding.

Part II deals with the received wisdom of psychodynamics, with two chapters focusing respectively on Freud's understanding of transference and intersubjectivity.

Part III, the challenge of Husserl, is made up of five chapters. It begins with an overview of an experiential introduction and of Husserl's phenomenology and method. In chapters 7 and 8, Owen offers some basic points of reference, ultimately to elucidate a range of perspectives of self and other in a meaningful world. These chapters serve as background to chapter 9, the centrepiece of Part III, on the way Husserl described

The Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology (IPJP) is a joint project of the Humanities Faculty of the University of Johannesburg (South Africa) and Edith Cowan University's Faculty of Regional Professional Studies (Australia) and published in association with NISC (Pty) Ltd. The *IPJP* is available online at www.ipjp.org.

This work is licensed to the publisher under the Creative Commons Attribution Licence 3.0.

co-constitution and intersubjectivity in his *Cartesian Meditations*. In chapter 10, Owen provides an interpretation of Husserl's *Fifth Cartesian Meditation* as a model of meaning in social contexts in order to promote the interpretive research and practice skills of a psychotherapist.

Part IV, a Husserlian critique of Freud, aims to challenge psychodynamic interpretations about unconscious objects and intentionalities. Chapter 11 introduces some of the consequences for interpretation and practice. If we want to know how consciousness works, and how one person's consciousness relates to another consciousness, and how meaning exists in relation to more than one person, it will require a psychological hermeneutics. Chapter 12, criticisms of Freud, argues that Freud's legacy as a hermeneutic problem, especially the ambiguities in the use of the word "unconscious", can create practical problems. Part IV concludes with a new interpretation of intersubjectivity and an understanding of emotions in a lived experience of intersubjectivity.

Part V, developing a hermeneutic pure psychology, explores temporality, hermeneutics and psychological meaningfulness. Chapter 14 introduces the value of Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology for psychotherapy. Some convergences between Husserl and Heidegger around the themes of intentionality, temporality and context are addressed in the next chapter. In Chapters 16 and 17, Owen argues that some problems in Husserl's system require correction and that the only way that phenomenology "can work" and be used in psychology and psychotherapy is as a hermeneutic phenomenology. Chapter 18 offers a brief conclusion on the theory and practice of psychotherapy.

Owen has produced a scholarly, thoroughly referenced and cross-referenced text. But it is not an easy read. To weave a coherent text using various strands from ontological, epistemological and methodological domains is an ambitious undertaking. From the reader it requires concentrated and deep reading. To create a tapestry of theoretical themes on intersubjectivity and co-empathy, with a view to contributing to a better informed practice of psychotherapy and doing justice to our humanity, requires considerable conceptual and reflective skills. For a reader to benefit from reading this work requires, at the very least, a solid grounding in the existential-phenomenological tradition. I found the text helpful in that it confirmed much of my understanding of phenomenology and hermeneutics and showed up the gaps in my reading and understanding of Husserl and Heidegger. In

particular, it challenged me with the question as to whether my existential-phenomenological conceptual framework captures or, better, "meets a (psycho-social) phenomenon".

The key arguments of phenomenology against the assumptions of a natural-science-based psychology are presented and worked out in great detail throughout the text. Consciousness, intentionality, perception, empathy and intersubjectivity all form part of the infrastructure of the moments of a meaningful whole wherein the perspectives of self and other on the same object interrelate. Herein lies the heart of the text: formalising a hermeneutics for the understanding of meaning from the perspective of all members of a dyadic or triadic relationship such as occurs in psychotherapy.

A review is not the place where one can respond in greater depth to many of the claims Owen makes. I will simply attempt to give the reader some sense of a few themes with which I engaged.

- (1) I agree with Owen: if we ignore conscious meaning or meaning as given to consciousness, it will lead to "faulty clinical reasoning" (p. 40). In order to create a more integrated intersubjective framework, Owen revisits and re-visions some of Freud's psychotherapeutic insights, in particular resistance, transference, counter-transference and unconscious communication. For Owen, this re-visioning is important because these concepts were Freud's attempt at understanding others and their perspectives. All these psychodynamic concepts are problematic because "the definition ... is inconclusive and insufficiently precise" (p. 47). Owen's critique of transference and counter-transference is challenging (pp. 70-82). In my view, his reflections are convincing philosophical and hermeneutic arguments for the psychodynamically unjustified way of interpreting unconscious processes in and between psychotherapist and client. Understanding emotions with specific reference to a critique of Freud's notions of transference and counter-transference is refreshing, as it uncovers how imprecise, inadequate and potentially unethical psychodynamic interpretations can be.
- (2) Many sections of chapters offer an opportunity for the further development of arguments in the form of further debate on refining and clarifying theoretical concepts that could serve as a basis for empirical research. For example, in section 29 of chapter 7, the familiar eight attitudes or approaches to things as hermeneutic are explicated and presented in a new way. From

this, Owen asserts that “how one approaches objects of various sorts gives rise to what is experienced about them” (p. 101). There is a progression from the natural attitude, to the naturalistic attitude, to the personalistic attitude that is the precursor to the fourth attitude, the phenomenological attitude. The progression continues to the intersubjective attitude, further reduced to a psychological attitude and the transcendental attitude. Finally, there is the eidetic attitude - the road to invariant constituents - which Owen correctly regards as the grounds for justified theoretical conclusions. Many of us are familiar with these philosophical attitudes that Owen articulates in a new way to arrive at an explanation of how to interpret experience and what phenomenology means for therapy (pp. 107-115). However, at this point I was struck by the fact that Owen develops his own map without recourse to or assistance from the discourse of American phenomenological psychology. With his return to Husserl, Owen does succeed in using phenomenology as a “pure psychology” to enable “therapy to have a general psychological model” or theory with which to continue deepening our understanding of first-person lived experience in general. Phenomenological psychology has come some way, but the challenge to construct “clear propositions about the nature of psychological processes and objects” (p. 119) remains an unfinished task. Much work remains to be done.

(3) A range of other themes are valuable, either as a way of deepening one’s multi-levelled understanding of the various discourses of phenomenology or as a platform for those who are not so familiar with phenomenology, especially at a postgraduate level. Some of these themes include:

- subsections on how the phenomenology of the body relates to the way in which apperception and empathy create an overall understanding of what it means to be an embodied consciousness, different types of meaning,
- the “cause” of meaning, how to interpret experience,
- understanding different orders and types of intentionality and the co-constitution of a meaningful world formulated as a set of theses.
- Some further insights are offered with respect to the relationship and tensions between describing and explaining.

In my view, one of the most interesting themes, so pertinent to psychotherapy, is the question of non-verbal communication, wordless understanding, and the question of conceptualising without language, as well as experiences outside of language. These topics cannot all be dealt with adequately in a text of this nature, but it implicitly provides many suggestions for further development and, above all, for working out a practice and doing empirical work because, as Owen rightly realises, theory and practice go together.

(4) One of the most valuable concepts that figures throughout the work is empathy. The focus is not merely on empathy, however, but on co-empathy. The elucidation of empathy (pp. 148-156) opens up a range of themes about human bodiliness; about how empathy is more than a perceptual presence, being rather a “double intentionality” of the self-Here and the other-There, involving a mutuality and reciprocity of self and other. These themes lead to the conclusion that human beings are “co-empathic and co-intentional” (p. 157), participating in a shared common world, co-constituting our meanings with the possibility of taking up many perspectives through a range of different orders of intentionality.

(5) The relationship between the philosophies of Husserl and Heidegger is discussed in great detail throughout the book. The convergences and divergences between the two approaches, the successes and failures, are weighed up. At the end of it all, Owen argues his preference for a hermeneutic phenomenology. The only way to make phenomenology work is to acknowledge that interpretation is a central concern for psychotherapy. If that is so, then it is impossible to stay outside the hermeneutic circle. From the strong and valid claim that the hermeneutic circle has intrinsic value (p. 258), it follows that psychotherapy must continue to develop an appreciation of its uses. Misunderstanding another has much to do with the fact that the hermeneutic circle has been entered in the wrong way. Studies of how the hermeneutic circle is entered correctly or wrongly in psychotherapy lie ahead of us. This theoretical study underlines the necessity for phenomenological psychologists to learn how to “read” before “reading off” the meanings that appear. How to translate this into practice has been only partially achieved in studies on psychotherapy. We might have to draw on other exponents of phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology such as Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur, Levinas and others to continue

the quest for an answer to the question as to what it is to meet a person. In spite of Husserl's theoretical analysis of intersubjectivity, a "blueprint for understanding psychological life", intersubjectivity remains an enigmatic domain because of the infinite variety of unique combinations that contribute to human life.

I have mentioned that this is not an easy read, and this will be true especially for psychotherapists who see themselves as tilling the ground, "farming" with and cultivating the concepts, ideas and insights of philosophers from the heights of theoretical deliberations. I come away from reading the text with

a greater appreciation for the nuances, subtleties, and fleeting profiles of meaning. I can imagine that a thorough study of this text could render a psychotherapist more finely attuned to the ways in which experiences and their meanings are lived and given to consciousness, and how meaning is constituted through co-empathy in the domain of intersubjectivity. Owen makes us aware of the dialectic relationship between theory and practice. We should give more systematic attention to the structure, content, processes and consequences of our conversations with others, and particularly to interpretations we make and offer.

About the Author

In 1999, after twenty-six years in the Department of Psychology at the University of Pretoria, Professor Rex van Vuuren took up the position of Academic Dean at St Augustine College, a private higher education institution currently offering only postgraduate programmes, in Midrand, South Africa. In the course of his academic career, Professor van Vuuren has published widely and has presented papers at both national and international conferences. He also organized the 14th International Human Science Conference which was held in Midrand in 1995. Professor van Vuuren is registered with the Professional Board in South Africa as both a Clinical Psychologist and a Research Psychologist. His professional and academic interests are grounded in existential-phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches and range across the areas of personality psychology, psychotherapy, and qualitative methods. He has also engaged in multidisciplinary dialogues between psychology and a wide range of disciplines, including architecture, education, philosophy and theology.