



### Book Review

## Phenomenology for Therapists: Researching the Lived World

Linda Finlay (2011). *Phenomenology for Therapists: Researching the Lived World*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

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by **Chris Milton**

Linda Finlay's book *Phenomenology for Therapists* (2011) is a book to serve practitioners of therapy. As a Jungian psychoanalyst deeply interested in research I am myself such a practitioner. It is useful to place my reading of this book in context. I began my own encounter with phenomenology at Rhodes University in South Africa in the mid-1970s during the heady days of Professor Dreyer Kruger's pioneering of phenomenology at that university. At the time I was fresh from immersion in the natural sciences and the major challenge was affecting a personal paradigm shift. A related challenge was the conceptual vocabulary of phenomenology, which was often dense and difficult to penetrate. This stood (and I believe still stands) in paradoxical contrast to its project of producing the successful communication of human phenomena. This paradox remains a challenge for both readers and writers of phenomenological works. It is no less so a challenge in Finlay's book.

In an attempt to be true to the spirit of phenomenology I shall, at least in part, try to present this review of Finlay's book as an articulation of my lived experience of reading her book. I suppose that it is the reviewer's task to diligently sit down and read a book in more or less one sitting and then to conduct a logical and aesthetic critique of the book. This was not quite how I addressed myself to this book, nor was it how Finlay's book addressed itself to me. Most of my reading of this book was conducted in my analytic consulting room. I started and stopped reading, I returned to it and re-read, I used the book in

the supervision of a student's Masters dissertation, the book fore-grounded and focussed my clinical work, my clinical work focussed and fore-grounded my reading of the book.

Let me now say that this book is valuable and useful. In reading it, I rejoiced in encountering concepts with which I am familiar as well as research practices that I have practised. However, I also struggled with the new, with the always-ever conceptually dense, and with research processes with which I am not familiar. To me, this testifies to the depth and breadth which Finlay demonstrates in this book. She has taken an almost encyclopaedic challenge and has largely met this challenge.

As I have already said, one of the enduring problematics of phenomenological research is the conceptual density of its philosophical background. It is, put very bluntly, difficult to access. This often means that novice researchers either neglect to use phenomenological research methods or get lost in their philosophy and develop less than sound research practice. This challenges the writer of a work on phenomenological research practice to establish a functional dialogue between conceptual articulation, on the one hand, and practical example on the other. Finlay works very hard to establish this functional dialogue. Its success is varied but this is not a fault of Finlay's book. Instead, it is the greater challenge of phenomenology. The success of Finlay's book must, on this count, be seen in its comprehensive nature, its

engage-ability, and its communicative power. These are difficult things to achieve.

The book comprises a Preface, three main sections and a brief appendix. The Preface introduces the reader to the promises and complexities of phenomenology. It also introduces the author's voice and echoes of the voices of others. I wondered if this is not itself an echo of her own preference for the relational-centred approach to research. All the chapters of the book are comprehensive and well structured – beginning with an (implicit) introduction, touring the chapter topic and concluding with Finlay's own useful reflections. The book is comprehensive and therefore faces the challenge of the sometimes impenetrable conceptual complexities that can beset the exposition of phenomenology.

The three main sections are:

1. The Phenomenological Project: Concepts, Theory and Philosophy;
2. Phenomenological Research Approaches;
3. Phenomenological Methods in Practice.

In the first of these sections Finlay commences by articulating, from a phenomenological perspective, what the psychoanalytically inclined Michael Rustin (1997) has described as the 'consulting room as laboratory', in other words the idea that therapy is a form of research. Finlay advocates for and encourages therapists in the conduct of phenomenological research by highlighting the similarities between therapy and phenomenology. As my reading of the book progressed I found myself more and more confronted by the question of what the role of the reader was in understanding the book. I could not help wondering how a novice in the field of phenomenology would read this text. This in itself is a phenomenological question. With some reservation, which I shall address shortly, I felt that the book made relatively easy sense of the phenomenological project, which, as I have already remarked, is often elusive. Paradoxically, the phenomenological project is often written in a philosophically sophisticated and complex way that is, to use the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut's (1971) term, "experience far". I found that Finlay generally writes in an accessible and 'experience near' way. My one reservation was the evident problems with grammar and editing which crop up again and again in the text and detract from the flow of reading at times. By way of an example of this problem, on page 24 we read: "Pat and I together set out together".

More positively in this first section I found Finlay's articulation of the philosophising of the body well done – as if she had done battle with phenomenology conceptually and distilled out a living articulation of

the concepts. She also invites consideration of more novel aspects of phenomenological research, in particular the practitioner using their own body responses as a reflexive source of data not only as a therapist but also as a researcher.

In the first section Finlay also does the obligatory tour of the philosophical foundations of phenomenology. This is something that Finlay executes well. It was interesting to have a supervisee reading and using this book at the same time as I was reading it because I witnessed, as I have several time before, how students unfamiliar with phenomenology are prone to dig into its philosophical foundations and try to derive the practice of phenomenological research from first principles. This is not a success but it is hardly the fault of the author of this book. Nonetheless, I was left wondering if authors of such phenomenological works might not more actively consider the foibles of the student who gets caught in this problem and how to address them in the writing of the book.

In the second section of the book Finlay addresses phenomenological research approaches and takes the reader through six phenomenological research approaches: descriptive empirical phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology, lifeworld approaches, interpretive phenomenological analysis, first-person approaches and reflexive-relational approaches. She writes these sections in a very useful way. For each approach, she first gives a conceptual exposition, then examples of the research and finally her own summary reflection. Her summary reflections are by and large excellent. The rather typical way of giving conceptual exposition before example does, however, mean that sometimes conceptually dense notions are presented without being grounded in the phenomenological reality of the example. Practically this meant that when I knew and/or had practised the particular form of phenomenological research myself I recognised it with delight in the conceptual exposition. However, when I did not know or had not used the method previously I had to engage in a cycle of re-reading in which I pursued the dialogue between theory and practice. This is inevitable but I believe that it would have served better both practically and phenomenologically if examples had preceded the conceptual exposition. I know that my suggestion is atypical but perhaps it is within the spirit of phenomenology.

In the third section Finlay presents phenomenological methods of practice, in particular: planning the research, gathering data, relational ethics, analysing the data, producing and evaluating the research. This is a very useful step-through of much of the structure of a higher degree, or of commissioned research. The Appendix offers an exemplar model for dealing with ethical dimensions of research.

Overall, by virtue of its comprehensive nature I felt that this book (which I imagine was a mammoth task to write) has both strengths and challenges. When I first commenced reading it I engaged in a focussed way at the micro-level noting the very small grammatical anomalies that I have already referred to, which challenged my understanding of particular sentences. As I continued to read, my over sensitive attention to detail receded as I gained a sense of, and respect for, Finlay's mastery of her subject. I also found that, on the one hand, I took delight in refining

the knowledge of phenomenology that I already possess and, on the other hand, I was introduced to less familiar, and indeed new, dimensions of phenomenological research.

As a dominantly clinical practitioner who nonetheless retains an active interest in research, and particularly phenomenological research, I found this book both useful and informative.

## Referencing Format

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## About the Author



Dr Chris Milton is a Jungian Analyst and Clinical Psychologist in private practice in Auckland, New Zealand. Currently devoting most of his time to adult analysis and supervision of clinicians, he has previously worked psychotherapeutically with adults as well as with children, adolescents and their families in both the private and public sectors. Dr Milton is President of the Australian and New Zealand Society of Jungian Analysts (ANZSJA) as well as a Training Analyst. He was previously appointed a founder member of the Psychotherapists Board of Aotearoa New Zealand on which he served for over three years. Apart from his clinical and analytical work, he has taught, examined and supervised in psychiatry, clinical psychology, psychoanalysis and analytical psychology in both institute and university settings. He has published and presented in the areas of infant mental health, psychoanalytic processes and the cultural complex. Dr Milton is interested in the phenomenology of psychoanalytic processes, particularly the definition of analysis, the ambience and aesthetics of the analytic encounter and shifts in analytic focus. He also maintains an interest in spirituality and transpersonal psychology. In recognition of his long-term and ongoing professional contributions, Dr Milton was recently granted membership of the Royal Society of New Zealand (a statutory research fostering body).

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