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Phenomenological Empathy and the Professional Role in Recovery-Oriented Practice: Interpersonal Understanding, Shared Decision Making, Closeness and Distance in the Working Relationship

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Abstract

This paper aims to show how a phenomenological theory of empathy can be used to achieve a close interpersonal relationship that serves to support shared decision making and recovery from mental health problems. This framework can also be seen as a way to maintain a professional distance in such relationships. First, the paper briefly describes the basics of shared decision making and recovery-oriented practice. Second, the paper presents the notion of second-person perspectivity, the "we-relation", and the phenomenological term *epoché* as a background to discussing the possibility of performing a specific kind of epoché, which actively brackets taken-for-granted presuppositions and notions and instead facilitates a focus on the meaning of the other's experience: a special kind of intentionality directed toward the other's intentionality. Third, the paper notes that the aim of actively assuming an empathic attitude paves the way for a passive ethnographic epoché that allows for an exploration of the other's personal world, which constitutes the context for meaning. In this way, we can increase the possibilities of developing a professional "we-relation" and minimizing the risk of emotional contagion. This is a skill that can be learned through training, and that can increase the possibility of developing a deeper interpersonal understanding that will be of value to recovery-oriented practice.

Keywords: *e*mpathy, applied phenomenology, professional role, we-relation, recovery, shared decision making

Introduction

> One of the most fundamental recovery principles is the principle of *'people first,'* i.e., people with mental illnesses are *people* before they are cases, diagnoses, or patients. (Anthony, 2003, p. 1, emphasis added)

Today, the empirical theory of science has a leading position and is taken for granted in both quantitative and qualitative research (Applebaum, 2012; Englander, 2018b, 2020).

Given the resulting focus on standardization, measurement, objectivity and evidence-based practice, this also affects professional practice in social work, psychiatry, and social psychiatry. In the quotation above, however, Anthony (2003) suggests that this reductionistic perspective is nowhere near sufficient in relation to recovery-oriented practices. He argues that evidence-based practice is too invested in the empirical theory of science, and is thus failing to acknowledge the existential and subjective lived experience of the person (client). As Parnas et al. (2013) have argued, "the only reason brain states can assume the importance they do is through their relationship with mental states identified on experiential grounds" (p. 271). We therefore need to broaden our perspective and restore the role of subjectivity in all practices that involve working with people living with mental health problems. This can be viewed as striving toward a new type of professional role, a role that sees the value of the interpersonal relationship and that uses this relationship to support decision making and the recovery process (Topor et al., 2006). Phenomenology, and in particular phenomenological empathy, can be of use in this regard. Davidson and Cosgrove (1991, p. 104) have argued that we cannot fully understand individual and personal experiences in the lifeworld without also understanding the conditions that precede and shape these experiences (i.e., their horizons/context). A phenomenological theory of empathy can provide the tools needed to understand the lived experience of clients and provide a way of obtaining insight into the personal world that constitutes the backdrop to a client's experience and meaning-making. Applied phenomenology in both social psychiatric practice and research and philosophy takes its point of departure in first-person experience in order to obtain access to meaning as it appears in relation to a context, as in the figure-ground relation (Englander, 2018b). Following Schütz (1999), one point of departure for this paper is that humans in their day-to-day lifeworld often perform *epoché,* passively or actively bracketing something in order to focus on something else, and that this is a skill that can be developed with training. I will return to the notion of epoché below.

I argue that phenomenological empathy training (Englander, 2014, 2019) could produce a professional ability to actively assume and remain in an *empathic attitude* in order to follow the other's intentionality and meaning. This would in turn lead us into the passive *ethnographic epoché* (Throop, 2018) that makes possible the appearance of the world of ever-shifting horizons that constitutes the context of all meaning. In this way, we would be able – together with the client – to develop a focus on, and explore, the options and opportunities that exist for *this specific person* in relation to his or her personal world. Davidson (2018) writes, "[W]e have learned that the recovery process depends, at least in part, on the opportunities and resources available to people as they are challenged to reconstruct their sense of self" (p. 19). Given this, professionals in the field of social psychiatry can actively work within their relationship with a client to support an exploration of the opportunities and resources available to that particular person in order for the client to then make decisions (for example about care and treatment) with regard to his or her own life. This is what Anthony (2010) calls "shared decision making", which constitutes an important part of any individual recovery process. I will argue that phenomenological empathy and ethnographic epoché will enable us to restore subjectivity and intersubjectivity to their rightful status in practices that involve interpersonal relations and recovering from mental health problems. I will also argue that this perspective can constitute the foundation for a new type of professional role that involves:

1. A deeper interpersonal relationship with the client, through which meaning can be explored together in a "we-relation" (Schütz, 1999), laying the ground for active work with "shared decision making" (Anthony, 2010) as a basis for individualized recovery from mental health problems.

2. A method of practice that supports the practitioner and the client in maintaining a close relationship that is simultaneously also characterized by both professional and emotional distance.

First- and Second-Person Perspectivity Based on Interpersonal Understanding

As Parnas et al. (2013) have noted, self, self-identity, agency, and reality, are all central themes for many (not to say all) psychopathological conditions, and these are "notions that all imply the issue of subjectivity and the first-person perspective" (p. 274). This means that we as professionals must take our point of departure in the other's *first-person perspective* in order to be able to work with what Anthony (2010) calls "shared decision making". For this to be possible, a reciprocal relationship is needed that is trusting and close but that at the same time maintains the focus on the other in order to explore the options and resources available to this other (Anthony, 2003). It is through our empathic ability that we are able to understand others; Zahavi (2019, p. 92) describes empathy as a basic and perceptual form of interpersonal understanding that is *a priori* to other, more complex forms of understanding. In addition to a phenomenological theory of empathy, the mainstream debate on "theory of mind" has been characterized by a focus on two dominant theories of understanding: "simulation theory" and "theory-theory" (Zahavi, 2010). Both of these deny the possibility of gaining direct access to other people's minds, whereas phenomenology acknowledges empathy as a means of obtaining direct access to and experience of the other's mind, although from a *second-person perspective* (Zahavi, 2001; Zahavi, 2010; Zahavi, 2019). Churchill (2018) writes:

> [I]t is ultimately by means of *empathy* that we are able to truly transcend our own point of view and experience the world from the other's standpoint, often through the adoption of a 'second person' perspective. (p. 208, italics in original)

Churchill (2012, p. 4) has also argued that neither third- nor first-person perspectivity is adequate as a point of departure for understanding the other. Third-person perspectivity is currently the point of departure for mainstream psychiatry with its focus on reliability, measurement, objectivity, and standardized questionnaires (Parnas et al., 2013), whereas first-person perspectivity, which involves starting from myself in order to understand the other by imagining or simulating how it would be for me to experience what the other is experiencing, focuses on myself rather than on the other.[1] Churchill (2012) argues that *second-person perspectivity* constitutes a special means of gaining access to the mind of the other that is possible in the "we-relation" in which

[1] This is not to say that no understanding could be achieved through simulation, only that in order to simulate one must first understand something; how else would simulation be possible? (Englander, 2019).

both of us are attuned to another "thou", that is, in a direct face-to-face encounter with the other (Zahavi, 2010), what is described is a reciprocity that makes possible an interpersonal understanding that goes in both directions. Following Churchill (2012):

> [S]econd person perspectivity is a special mode of access to the other that occurs *within* the first person plural: in 'experiencing the other within the we', we are open to the other as a 'thou', another 'myself' – at the same time, I am able to appreciate that at the same moment I become an intimate 'other' to the one with whom I find myself in an 'exchange'. Thus, the secret to understanding second person perspectivity is realizing that it works *in both directions at the same time,* and always within a 'we-relation'. (p. 4, italics in original)

The fact that both of us are reciprocally attuned to one another means that a Schutzian "we-relation" is created (Zahavi, 2010, p. 298). From the *second-person perspective* it is possible to follow the other's experience in his or her *first-person perspective* within the "we-relation". This gives us a theoretical and practical point of departure to be able to create and maintain a relationship that is reciprocal and grounded in interpersonal understanding.

Empathy as a Tool and Means of Protection

A very important part of the phenomenology of empathy is the fact that the other's experience is just that, *the other's* (Englander, 2019; Zahavi, 2019). This means that emotions and expressions connected to the other's experience also belong to the other and that empathy is not mixed up with one's own experience or emotions: "For the phenomenologists, empathy is not to be conflated with emotional contagion, imaginative perspective-taking, sympathy or compassion" (Zahavi, 2019, p. 92). There is no need to, as in simulation theory, "walk in the other's shoes" to be able to understand something of the other's experience of the world. Instead, we can maintain our professional role in the second-person perspective and our focus on the other without confusion about who the experience really belongs to and thus avoid being pulled (too far) into sympathy and compassion. This then ensures the other's agency and ownership of the experience.

> In empathy, the experience you empathically understand remains that of the other. The focus is on the other, and not on yourself, not on how it would be like for you to be in the shoes of the other. That is, the distance between self and other is preserved and upheld. (Zahavi, 2010, p. 291)

In this way we can be present to the other's meaning-expression, for example expressions of strong emotions, without these emotions necessarily affecting us. This perspective ensures a focus on the other as well as an emotional distance; we are able to experience the emotions of others without matching our mental state to theirs (Zahavi 2010, p. 291) or experiencing *the same* things as the other. A close relationship can be built and maintained with a clear point of departure in the client's personal world with all its individual presuppositions and possibilities. This does not mean that professionals cannot or should not share their own experiences or express

sympathy and compassion. On the contrary, it is important to build reciprocal relationships, a form of balance that can be seen as a “professional friendship”, or a relationship that is constituted by both closeness and distance at the same time (Berggren & Gunnarsson, 2010). This view of empathy should thus be seen as a tool to build relationships with a clear focus on the client’s needs, resources, and possibilities. This makes possible a choice to share those of one’s own emotions and thoughts that are connected to the other’s experience, which can thus enrich the experience and the meaning in that experience without stealing any focus from the other’s first-person experience or the professional relationship.

Phenomenological empathy thus fulfills two functions within the framework of this paper:

1. Interpersonal understanding from a second-person perspective

2. A means to build a close relationship that at the same time preserves emotional distance.

Against this background, phenomenological empathy can be seen as a tool that can be used to follow the other’s expression of meaning from his or her first-person perspective, while at the same time protecting the professional from emotional contagion or any confusion about the ownership of the experience. A phenomenologically grounded theory of empathy thus constitutes one way of working to build a professional relationship that is personal but not private – a relationship that takes its point of departure in the personal world of the other while maintaining a professional role.

Epoché and Attitude

In this section, I will describe how we can assume an *empathic attitude* that leads to passive *ethnographic epoché.* In order to do this, I first need to discuss what epoché is, and how the term can be understood. Embree (2011) defines epoché as: “suspending of acceptance” (p. 123), a form of bracketing, and claims, in line with Schütz (1999), that people in general use different types of epoché in everyday life, both passively and actively. Embree (2011) writes:

> Strictly speaking, *‘epoché’* names a mental operation, ‘reduction’ refers to a consequent change in attitude, and ‘purification’ refers to a consequent change in the thing-as-intended-to whereby something is somehow purified in some respect and thereby becomes in some respect pure. (p. 123)

The attitude that is bracketed through epoché – in order to assume another attitude with a different focus – is the attitude that returns when epoché is relaxed (i.e., the natural attitude) (Embree, 2011, p. 124). What is bracketed is thus something that is pre-supposed and taken for granted, and something that we, through epoché, can bring into view and then place within brackets in order to assume another perspective and focus. For instance, most of us bracket some aspects of our personal emotions when we attend a

meeting at work, to use an example from Englander (2019). Embree (2011) goes on to describe several types of epoché, and argues that there is a need to name the form of epoché in use by describing what is bracketed and/or what it aims to achieve. An *empathic attitude* is made possible by a psychological reduction, i.e., a bracketing of our taken-for-granted notions of reality that consist of objects and causality. The goal is to instead view reality as consisting of experiential acts that come to light in the interrelation between subject and object; intentionality (Davidson & Cosgrove, 1991, p. 93). What is of interest is thus neither the object in itself nor the subject in itself, but the relationship between object and subject, that is intentionality: i.e., *how* the object appears to consciousness, rather than *what* the object is (Zahavi, 2019). The point of epoché is thus to bring the constitution of phenomena to light: to study intentionality rather than causality (Englander, 2016, p. 4), with the point of departure being that a phenomenon always consists of both subject and object. What is bracketed is the existential index of the object (as explained below) and our pre-suppositions of the object (Davidson 2003). In this way, we can obtain a purified focus on that which appears for us (i.e., that to which we are present). We are then able to assume an empathic attitude by means of psychological reduction.

Empathic Attitude

Phenomenological empathy training, following Englander (2014, 2019), could provide the tools needed to assume and remain in an empathic attitude when working with clients or patients.[2] What is trained is the skill to bracket one's own pre-suppositions and to instead focus on the other's meaning-expressions. This can in turn increase the possibility of an explicit discovery-oriented and holistic approach to the intersubjective context that constitutes the base for the "we-relation" at which we are aiming. Englander (2018a, p. 61) argues that the empathic attitude opens up the possibility to achieve the framework for a professional alliance in which we, together in a "we-intentionality", can be present to the other's expressions of meaning, i.e., we can both be directed toward the client's experience and the meaning of that experience. Englander (2014, 2019) has shown that by practicing phenomenological empathy training we can actively and deliberately assume an *empathic attitude* via a specific kind of epoché in which we focus on, and follow, the meaning-expressions of the other rather than the existential index and empirical facts. "[W]e are trying to disclose meanings that are *a priori* to our judgement" (Englander, 2019, p. 44.). We follow the meaning that exists for the other in the experience regardless of whether that which is experienced exists or does not exist in the empirical world. The point of departure is that the lived experience of the other exists for that person and that this experience has meaning. For instance, if a client tells us about hearing voices or being followed by a unicorn, our focus is not directed at whether this is true or false; rather, we are present to and follow the meaning that the experience has for the client. Davidson (2003) writes:

[2] The training is a part of the educational program for social workers and psychiatric nurses at Malmö University. There is a lot more that could be said about phenomenological empathy training, but this lies beyond the scope of this article. I refer interested readers to Englander's (2014, 2019) work on this topic.

> We place in brackets all realities ordinarily presumed to exist outside of this person's experience, including the causal context of nature, and focus exclusively on her experiences themselves as *the* realities in which we are interested. Rather than explaining her experience on the basis of underlying causes, we attempt to understand its meaning and structure from the perspective of the subject as it was *lived* (i.e., experienced) by her. (p. 100, italics in original)

Within an empathic attitude we are able to follow expressions of meaning as they are presented by the other and thus appear to us in the empathic encounter – face to face (Englander, 2018a). In phenomenological empathy training, we try to be strictly present to the other's meaning-expressions and, through empathic reflections and responses, we describe for the other what it is we are being present to instead of trying to solve problems or explain the experience (Englander, 2019); that is, we verbalize our understanding. We try to focus on the meaning of the experience (i.e., the intentionality), not on the experience itself. The verbalization of empathy opens up a sense of participation and trust (Englander, 2014). Obviously, it may be appropriate to solve a problem or explain experience within the professional context, but the point here is that interpersonal understanding is *a priori* to such explanations or interventions.

In this way, it is possible to explore meaning and the context of meaning together on the basis of a reciprocal *second-person perspectivity* and in an emphatically grounded "we-relation". This can in turn constitute a frame for working with shared decision making that proceeds from the client's individual context and personal world. This can be seen as a way to meet the client where he or she is, in an existential sense, and to anchor our working methods in an interpersonal understanding within the professional relationship. Following phenomenological empathy training, the *empathic attitude* can be seen as an active attitude, which we can practice assuming, maintaining, and reflecting over. By bracketing our pre-understanding and natural attitude, through a psychological reduction, and by being present to the other's meaning-expressions, we open a door to the other's personal world: a world which constitutes the background that makes the appearance of meaning possible. Zahavi (2019) writes:

> [T]he three dimensions of 'self', 'other', and 'world' belong together, they reciprocally illuminate one another, and can only be fully understood in their interconnection. (p. 88)

All meaning is context dependent, and the context is in itself constituted by horizons that shape the personal world, a world that we are able to explore through a passive *ethnographic epoché* that occurs through and within an empathic attitude.

Ethnographic Epoché

The person and his or her world must be understood in their interrelation. By bracketing our own pre-suppositions and point of departure, we can direct our intentionality toward the other's intentionality and thus gain a focus on the meaning-expressions of the other in their interrelation with their object (experience) and their relation to the other's personal

world. This then enables us, by means of our own intuition (Giorgi, 1997), to catch sight of the horizons that make the appearance of the other's meaning structures possible. This leads us (within the "we-relation") from an active empathic attitude to passive ethnographic epoché:

> [T]he ethnographic epoché is a *passive* and *responsive* one – one that arises from, and makes discernible, some of our most deeply sedimented and taken-for-granted assumptions, orientations, habits, and dispositions. (Throop, 2018, p. 205, emphasis added)

Still, it is through the empathic attitude that we have opened the possibility for a "we-intentionality" directed at the discovery of how the other's personal world appears through expressions of meaning. We are both in attunement with the world: "To be attuned is thus to precisely find oneself already in relation to the world and responsive to it" (Throop, 2018, p. 202). The horizons that constitute the world are not fixed but ever-changing. This is why we, through our attunement to the world, can follow new and altered horizons that are in constant movement, and be present to an ever-changing flux of horizons (Throop, 2018). By means of our openness and attunement to the world, we can follow the movements in it. Thus, we are passively responsive to the constant movement of horizons.

By actively assuming an empathic attitude, our pre-suppositions and taken-for-granted notions are bracketed. This allows the personal world of the other to appear for us and come into focus. Consequently, the possibility for ethnographic epoché is opened as a consequence of the empathic attitude. This does not mean that we completely forget what we know beforehand (pre-suppositions and pre-understandings do not disappear). What happens is, in fact, a change of attitude (Englander, 2016, p. 4) that brings our taken-for-granted views to light and that consequently leads to a focus on the other's meaning structure as this appears in relation to the ever-changing horizons in the personal world of the other. In this way we can alternate between a focus on meaning and a focus on context, with an explicit point of departure in the experience of the other. There are thus two epochés in play, which are related to one another, the empathic and the ethnographic. The ethnographic epoché occurs within the empathic attitude, which is gained through a psychological reduction (as discussed above). We thus gain access to the client's sociocultural and existential personal world, which has shaped the structures of the client's experience and meaning. This can then be used as a framework for shared decision making and to support an individual recovery process. Parnas et al. (2013) write:

> It is crucial to understand phemomenal consciousness (subjectivity) as the overall field, ground, or horizon within which all 'manifestation' or 'presencing' of the objects of our awareness occurs. Consciousness, the phenomenal manifestation of thoughts, feelings, and perception, is not some kind of complex spatial, 3-dimensional object, but a lived reality, a presence to *itself* and the *world.*" (p. 274, emphasis added)

The foundation for meaning is also the foundation for the options and possibilities that are accessible to the client in his or her personal world. By assuming an empathic

attitude, we gain a focus on the other's experience and expressions of meaning, both of which are context dependent and have acquired their focus in relation to a background (i.e., on the basis of a personal world), as in a figure/ground relation (Englander, 2018b). Or as Davidson and Cosgrove (2003) put it: "psychological subject and world are but different constituted poles of the same intentional relation" (p. 147). Together, an empathic attitude and an ethnographic epoché constitute the premises that both precede and improve the possibility of supporting the client from the client's current point of departure.

Conclusion

All meaning is context dependent and appears against a background. Just as it would not be possible to read these words without a white background, it is not possible to follow meaning without a context; a figure/ground relation of some kind is required. This also holds true in interpersonal encounters, in which we follow the other's intentionality by means of an empathic attitude. This constitutes the basis for working with people who are living with mental health issues, who experience psychopathological problems that cannot be understood in depth without the background constituted by ever-changing horizons. Through an empathic attitude, with explicit focus on the other, we can reach a state of discovery in which we can open up our consciousness to the other's personal world. This leads to an ethnographic epoché that occurs *within the empathic attitude*. Thereby, we can bring the other's personal world to light and thus obtain a deeper perception of the person's lifeworld and personal story, all from a second-person perspective. This may serve as a foundation for a more profound interpersonal understanding that is constituted by closeness and trust, but without the need for a private relationship. From this profound and close relationship, based on reciprocal understanding, we can, within the framework of a "we-relation", build an individual foundation for working with supported decision making and recovery. This gives us both an explicitly theoretical and practical point of departure that makes possible an approach through which we can separate interpersonal understanding from compassion and emotional contagion, and that thus enables us to maintain a balance between professionalism and friendship, that is, a new type of professional role in recovery-oriented practice. I would argue that the notion of an empathic attitude is relevant for this role in several respects:

1. The empathic attitude can be seen as a tool that enables one to follow the other's meaning expressions and their horizons for meaning. Consequently, through an empathic attitude, we can enter the ethnographic epoché that allows us to also follow the personal world that constitutes the context for meaning.

2. It makes possible individualized methods for support that are grounded in interpersonal understanding with the point of departure where the client is.

3. The empathic attitude can also serve as a means to bridge some of the risks that can come from working within close interpersonal relationships, such as emotional contagion and projection.

4. It provides a means to keep the focus on the professional role and to minimize the risk of winding up in a fixed role as either a therapist or a friend, instead maintaining the relationship as that of a "professional friend".

Altogether, this may provide a possible foundation for practical interpersonal and recovery-oriented practice that can be of use to all professions working with people in need of support, but one which is perhaps most useful for practices focused on people who are living with serious mental health problems. As Throop (2018) has put it, it constitutes a means "[t]o open up, in short, new possibilities for thinking by means of our concrete encounters with others, objects, situations, events, and the world" (p. 201). With a phenomenological framework for social psychiatric practice, we can restore first-person perspectivity, subjectivity and intersubjectivity to their rightful status within all recovery-oriented practices.

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