

Theoretical influences underpinning Relational Research

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"Relational theory...is a domain of many diverse waters and much eclecticism even within defined streams of practice", says de Young (2003, p.39). Four particular tributaries that feed into our relational approach to research are: dialogical gestalt psychotherapy; existential phenomenology; intersubjectivity theory and relational psychoanalysis¹. Ideas between these four theories overlap considerably while they also contribute specific riches.

Dialogical Gestalt psychotherapy

The first significant influence on our approach to relational centred research is dialogical Gestalt psychotherapy, which focuses on the healing dialogue in psychotherapy and the importance of the space between therapist and client as the area in which healing takes place. Two foundational ideas underpinning Gestalt theory are: i. the most helpful focus of psychology/therapy is the 'now', the present experiential moment. ii. We only know ourselves through the web of our relational interconnections (Latner, 2000).

The philosophical base of Gestalt draws primarily on existential phenomenology and field theory (Lewin); the work of the phenomenological philosopher, theologian and educator Buber (1923/1996) being of particular significance. Writing of the more spiritual dimensions of human relationships, Buber talked poetically of the *I-Thou* relationship where each person is accepting of and open to the other. The *I-Thou* relationship is free from judgment, narcissism, demand, possessiveness, objectification, greed or anticipation. Persons respond creatively in the moment to the other, eschewing instrumental and habitual ways of interactions (as found in the *I-It* relationship).

"Where the dialogue is fulfilled in its being, between partners who have turned to one another in truth, who express themselves without reserve and are free of the desire for semblance, there is brought into being a memorable common fruitfulness...The interhuman opens out what otherwise remains unopened." (Buber, 1965, p.86).

Gestalt therapy has over some 60 years evolved and matured its understanding and clinical application of the importance of the quality of contact in the meeting between therapist and client, as exemplified, for example, in the writings of Hycner & Jacobs (1995), Staemmler (1997), Whewy (1997); Yontef (1993); and Evans and Gilbert (2005). In the current view of dialogical Gestalt psychotherapy, the therapist attends to his or her own empathic, authentic presence while surrendering to the relational space *between* therapist and client. "If we take seriously the concept of the between there is a reality that is greater than the sum total of the experience of the therapist and the client. Together they form a totality that provides a context for the individual experience of both. Perhaps that is the most succinct meaning of the between" (Hycner 1993, p.134-5). The therapist commits to and trusts the 'process' of whatever appears figural at the moment of the embodied dialogical/experiential encounter.

¹ We could have included a number of other theories and paradigms such as humanistic theory, radical feminist theory, existentialism, personal construct theory, narrative theory, systems theory, to name a few. These theories are potentially of equal relevance to relational research approaches. They also intersect in relevant ways with the theories mentioned above. However, we had to draw the line somewhere and we decided on the 'big four' mentioned above as these were the theories most commonly cited when discussing 'relational psychotherapy'.

Existential phenomenology

Closely overlapping with Gestalt theory is existential phenomenological philosophy. Existential phenomenologists are concerned to return to embodied lifeworld experience.

The phenomenological philosopher Merleau-Ponty calls our attention to the way existences (beings) are dynamically interconnected: "I discover in that other body a miraculous prolongation of my own intentions...As the parts of my body together comprise one system, so my body and the other person's are one whole." (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p.354). In his later work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, he elaborates this idea by employing the radical metaphors of 'chiasm' and 'flesh'. When he writes of "the intertwining of my life with the lives of others" (1964/1968, p.49), he emphasises the interpenetration of self-other, body-world. The flesh of the world and the individual as flesh are seen as enveloped in a reversible 'double-belongingness'.

In using such tantalisingly mysterious metaphors, Merleau-Ponty is calling our attention to the body which is in primordial relationship with others and the world and full of implicit meanings and relational understandings. Applying such ideas to research, existential phenomenologists argue that it is our corporeal commonality and capacity for intersubjectivity which create the possibility of real empathy and understanding of the other. It is our embodied "intersubjective horizon of experience that allows access to the experiences of others" (Wertz, 2005, p.168). Engaging in existential analysis involves examining one's embodied relations with self and others.

The embodied enquiry research approach of Todres (2007) exemplifies this focus. Drawing specifically on the work of Gendlin (1978) as well as philosophers such as Heidegger (1962) and Merleau-Ponty (1962), Todres outlines his approach as four assertions:

- "Embodied enquiry is a practice that attends to the relationship between language and the experiencing body.
- Embodied enquiry marries thought and feeling, 'head' and 'heart'.
- Embodied enquiry, by not relying on thought alone, opens itself to what is creative and novel – the pre-patterned 'more' of the lifeworld.
- The kind of embodied understanding that arises from the practice of embodied enquiry is *humanising* and is much needed in a world that too easily objectifies self and other.

Intersubjectivity theory

Overlapping with phenomenology, as well as psychoanalytic theory, is intersubjectivity theory. Experiencing, in this theory, is seen to emerge out of interactions within the intersubjective field (past and present relationships) while the unconscious is seen not as a container of id impulses but to do with conscious and unconscious intersubjective dynamics.

Intersubjectivity theory was initially informed by Kohut's self psychology theory. Kohut developed the idea of selfobject to fill the gap in object relations theory. He proposed the idea that clients suffered from deficits of the selfobject experiences that sustain self-esteem and cohesion (such as experiencing being cared for by others). The therapeutic situation forms the key intersubjective field of focus as the relationship with the therapist being the medium in which derailed self-development is repressed. However, the idea that therapists provide an empathic relationship to enable the client to use the therapist in a 'self-object' manner to 'heal past deficits or 'kick start' the developmental momentum means that self psychology is still primarily a one-person psychology. The therapist is not an equal participant in the relationship, but rather functions to provide empathy for the client's selfobject needs.

Further extending Kohut's thinking Stolorow, Atwood, and others developed their intersubjectivity theory to highlight the interpersonal dimension and to conceptualise the therapeutic relationship as an interactive process of "reciprocal mutual influence"; (Stolorow and Atwood, 1992, p.18).

They write, "clinical phenomena...cannot be understood apart from the intersubjective contexts in which they take form. Patient and analyst together form an indissoluble psychological system" (Atwood & Storolow 1984, p.64). They use the term "codetermination" (1992, p.24) to describe this reciprocal process in development and in psychotherapy.

Relational psychoanalysis

Finally, we draw from contemporary relational psychoanalysis in which term 'relational' was first applied to psychoanalysis by Greenberg and Mitchell in 1983. In this approach, person's learned patterns of interactions are seen to be the root of their psychological problems.

Relational psychoanalysis arises out of interpersonal psychoanalysis (Sullivan) and object relations theory (Klein, Fairburn) while also pulling on other perspectives such as feminist theory. Ideas from traditional psychoanalysis that innate drives were the basis of psychic development were dropped in favour of the view that the individual developed in relationship with other people. (Winnicott, for example, thought it was impossible to think of a person separately, since from birth we are always in relation to others).

Moving away from traditional psychoanalysis², therapist neutrality is no longer an *a priori* given, but instead the therapist is acknowledged as having a major influence on the client's conscious and unconscious experience. Furthermore, both client and therapist are seen to influence one another and share together the range of emotions generated in the process. "The patient-analyst relationship as continually established and re-established through ongoing mutual influence in which both patient and analyst systematically affect, and are affected by, each other" (Aron, 1999, p.248). Within this 'comingling', therapist *self disclosure* is being increasingly seen to be a powerful intervention in the unfolding of the therapy process, especially with regard to the nature and meaning of resistance (Rucker and Lombardi, 1998).

Relational analysts argue that learned patterns of interaction are inevitably enacted in the therapy situation and so careful attention needs to be paid to what is happening in the therapy relationship. Special attention is paid to regression and transference as powerful unconscious manifestations of early trauma while the relational analyst tries to find the best mix of safety and challenge (unsettling the client's customary way of being in that relationship) to help the client construct new meaningful narratives. In these ways, focusing on the immediate therapy relationship is thought to impact on the client's way of being in wider relationships.

In summary, all the overlapping theories outlined above prioritise our relational world, though their points of focus differ in the way they variously highlight the importance of dialogue, embodied experiencing, intersubjectivity and the relational unconscious. Arguably, dialogical Gestalt theory, phenomenology and relational psychoanalysis extend the 'interhuman' beyond the individual focus on subjectivity in intersubjectivity theory and push further the understanding of the richness of the relational nature of persons (Evans & Gilbert 2005) ³.

² Freud's early illumination of unconscious processes significantly undermined the illusion of Descartes of the human being as a rationale person and opened the door to the exploration of unconscious processes. However, classical psychoanalysis appears to have remained firmly entrenched in the modernist or enlightenment paradigm and still believes that relationships are shaped by individual drives while contemporary psychoanalysis (and arguably gestalt psychotherapy is also a school of psychoanalysis) acknowledges that relationships have meanings that cannot be located within the psychic processes of the individual isolated mind. Newtonian cause and effect has now given way to post modern epistemologies such as relativism, constructivism and field theory. Contemporary psychoanalysis is very much a two person psychology (Aron, 1996).

³ While Stolorow and Atwood (1992) argue that: "the trajectory of self experience is shaped at every point in development by the intersubjective system in which it crystallizes" (1992, p.18), the theory is still focused on the subjectivity of the client or therapist. It does not appear as radical as dialogical gestalt psychotherapy, phenomenological philosophy or relational psychoanalysis in focussing on the *between* the relational ground between the therapist and client.