

PHENOMENAL ANALYSIS:
EXEMPLIFIED BY A STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCE OF
"REALLY FEELING UNDERSTOOD"¹

ADRIAN L. VAN KAAM

Brandeis University, Waltham, Mass.

The method of so-called phenomenal analysis, or analysis of what a situation means to a person, has in recent years gained in influence in the areas of psychotherapy, counseling, and personality theory. Has this method also something to offer to the study of general psychological phenomena?

Various psychologists have known or suspected the possible contribution of phenomenal analysis to general psychology. This was most forcefully expressed by Koehler: "Never, I believe, shall we be able to solve any problems of ultimate principle until we go back to the source of our concepts—in other words, until we use the phenomenological method, the qualitative analysis of experience" (4, p. vii). R. B. MacLeod has tried to convey the value of phenomenal analysis when he declared: "To be scientific is to be curious in a disciplined way, i.e., to try to understand (not merely to predict or control) with the aid of the best available methods of observation, deduction, and verification" (7, p. 215). And Asch wrote in reference to social psychology: "I have found it necessary to keep in the forefront the human modes of experiencing the world of nature and men, since the social actions of which we will speak are those of conscious beings who act largely in terms of what they understand and feel" (1, p. x).

When man starts to think or to speak about his experiences, he is trying to express his awareness. It is by this formulation that awareness becomes conceptual knowledge, and this is a necessary preparation for any communication concerning subjective phenomena. The implicit and vague awareness of a complex subjective phenomenon changes by the process of expression and formulation into explicit knowledge of its components. We call this process *explication*. This is essentially what we find in the process of therapy, where the patient gradually learns to express his implicit, vague, painful self-experience

¹This paper is based on a Ph.D. dissertation submitted to the department of psychology, Western Reserve University. The author wishes to express his gratitude to Dwight W. Miles and George W. Albee for their encouragement and advice, and to Carl Rogers, A. H. Maslow, and Kurt Goldstein for many stimulating discussions.

in an explicitly labeled description of what is going on in his subjective life.

THE METHOD OF GENERAL PHENOMENAL ANALYSIS

Can there be a repeatable, more or less controlled method for analyzing those modes of experiencing which seem to have general validity and are therefore useful for the construction of a lawful theory of human experience? Intrigued by this question, we tried to develop such a method by subjecting one kind of human experience, namely, the experience of really feeling understood, to controlled analysis. The aim of the analysis was to find the necessary and sufficient constituents of this experience.

Our basic assumption is that the core of such common experiences is the same in different individuals. This does not seem unreasonable when one deals with normal individuals belonging to groups that are not too different. Other people do understand what is basically meant when someone says, "I am happy," or "I am bored," or "I feel sad" (8, 9).

Subjects

To arrive at the core of common experience, we collected explications from 365 students: 245 high school seniors (95 boys and 150 girls), and 120 college students (60 men and 60 women). This relatively large number of untrained subjects for a study of this kind assures the reporting of a great number and variety of situations in which the subjects had the experience, and enables us to distinguish that which is constant from that which varies in the different situations.

Obtaining the Data

Each subject received a sheet of paper with the following instructions on the top: "Describe how you feel when you feel that you are really being understood by somebody. (a) Recall some situation or situations when you felt you were being understood by somebody; for instance, by mother, father, priest, girl friend (boy friend), uncle, doctor, teacher, etc. (b) Try to describe how you felt in that situation (not the situation itself). (c) Try to describe your feelings just as they were. (d) Please do not stop until you feel that you have described your feelings as completely as possible."

Beyond this, each subject was asked for his age, sex, marital status, and occupation, but not his name. An hour of class time was set aside for this task, and the subjects were free to spend on it as much of this hour as they wanted.

Analysis of the Data

Since the aim of the analysis was to find the necessary and sufficient constituents of the experience in question, the data were processed according to six operations which, although they may be specified, most often overlap and do not follow a fixed order. They partly describe in a set of ordered abstractions what the experimenter experiences as a natural totality.

1 - 2. *Listing and rough preliminary grouping.* Phenomenal analysis is based on the data as presented by the subject, and every expression must be listed, whether or not believed worthwhile by the researcher. This faithfulness to "things as they appear" (phenomenon = that which appears) results in a wide range of expressions, some of which may be superfluous for the final purpose of the analysis. This inclusiveness avoids the selective influence of any implicit philosophy of the researcher at this stage. It also enables other researchers to do control analyses on the basis of raw data.

3 - 4. *Reduction and elimination.* Each expression of a subject is tested for two requirements: (a) Does it contain a moment of the experience that might eventually be a necessary and sufficient constituent of the experience under study? (b) If so, is it possible to abstract this moment and to label it, without violating the formulation presented by the subject? Expressions not meeting these two requirements are eliminated. Concrete, vague, and overlapping expressions are reduced to more exactly descriptive terms. For instance, the expression, "I feel a hundred pounds less heavy," and "a load is off my chest," might be reduced to "feeling of relief."

5. *Tentative identification of the descriptive constituents.* All expressions found in the preceding step to be direct or indirect representatives of a common relevant moment of the experience are brought together in a cluster which is labeled with the more abstract formula expressing this common moment. One expression may pertain to various clusters, namely, when it represents several moments of experience.

6. *Final identification of the descriptive constituents by application.* The operation consists in checking the tentatively identified constituents against random cases of the sample to see whether they fulfill the following conditions. Each constituent must (a) be expressed explicitly in some explications, (b) be expressed explicitly or implicitly in the large majority of explications, (c) be compatible with the explications in which it is not expressed. (d) If an explication is found incompatible with a constituent, the former must be proven to be not an expression of the experience under study, but of some other experience which intrudes upon it.

Regarding the reliability of the analysis, the six operations were carried out by two additional judges independently. The results of each operation are based on the consensus of all three judges.

RESULTS

In this way we arrived at the necessary constituents of the experience under study, with the following general operational definition: A necessary constituent of a certain experience is a moment of the experience which, while explicitly or implicitly expressed in the significant majority of explications by a random sample of subjects, is also compatible with those descriptions which do not express it. Nine constituents were finally identified as being together necessary and sufficient for the experience of "really feeling understood;" these are shown in Table 1.

TABLE I. CONSTITUENTS OF THE EXPERIENCE OF "REALLY FEELING UNDERSTOOD" AS FINALLY IDENTIFIED, AND PERCENTAGES OF 365 SUBJECTS EXPRESSING EACH CONSTITUENT, EXPLICITLY OR IMPLICITLY.

Constituents of the Experience of "Really Feeling Understood"	Percentages Expressing the Constituents
Perceiving signs of understanding from a person	87
Perceiving that a person co-experiences what things mean to subject	91
Perceiving that the person accepts the subject	86
Feeling satisfaction	99
Feeling initially relief	93
Feeling initially relief from experiential loneliness	89
Feeling safe in the relationship with the person understanding	91
Feeling safe experiential communion with the person understanding	86
Feeling safe experiential communion with that which the person understanding is perceived to represent	64

The synthetic description of the experience of really feeling understood, containing these constituents, is given below, followed by a justification and explanation of each phrase of the description.

The experience of | "really | feeling understood" | is a perceptual-emotional Gestalt: | A subject, perceiving | that a person | co-experiences | what things mean to the subject | and accepts him, | feels, initially, relief from experiential loneliness, | and, gradually, safe experiential communion | with that person | and with that which the subject perceives this person to represent.

The experience of: The term "experience" is preferred to "feeling" because the data show that this phenomenon, commonly called feeling, contains perceptual moments too.

really: The adverb "really" added to "feeling understood" emphasizes the distinction between objective and subjective understanding. The latter includes the "what it means to me" element and the emotional involvement of the subject.

feeling understood: This popular expression is maintained because it is used by most people when they express this experience spontaneously.

is a perceptual-emotional Gestalt: The data compel us to distinguish between perceptions and feelings (emotions), the former being predominantly object-directed, the latter subject-directed. But the perceptions and emotions are interwoven in experience; the term "Gestalt" implies that the distinction we make between perceptual and emotional moments does not correspond to a separation in reality.

A subject, perceiving: The perceptual moment is mentioned first because of its priority in the explications obtained. The feeling of really being understood presupposes the perception of understanding as it is evidenced by various behavioral signs of understanding.

that a person: The subject perceives that a "person," a fellow human being,

understands him in a personal way. The understanding person is not experienced only as an official, a teacher, an adult, or so on, but as being-a-person.

co-experiences: The understanding person shares at an emotional level the experiences of the subject understood. The prefix "co-" represents the awareness of the subject that the person understanding still remains another.

what things mean to the subject: The subject perceives that the person understanding experiences the events, situations, and behavior affecting the subject in the way in which they affect him, and not as they might affect others.

and accepts him: Even while sharing experiences of the subject, which the person understanding does not accept personally, he manifests exclusively and consistently genuine interest, care, and basic trust toward the subject, whether the subject intends to change his views, feelings or behavior, or not.

feels, initially, relief from experiential loneliness: The initial feeling of relief is the joyous feeling that experiential loneliness, a disagreeable perceptual-emotional Gestalt, is receding to the degree that real understanding is experienced. The adjective "experiential" specifies that it is not primarily a physical loneliness, but a being-alone in certain inner experiences.

and, gradually, safe experiential communion: This expresses that the subject gradually experiences that the self is in the relieved, joyful condition of sharing its experience with the person understanding. "Safe" emphasizes that the subject does not feel threatened by the experience of sharing himself.

with that person: The deep personal relationship between the subject and the person understanding is not only prevalent in the perceptual, but also, and still more fundamentally, in the emotional area. Therefore our synthetic description not only opens, but also closes with a reference to this person-to-person relationship.

and with that which the subject perceives this person to represent: When the person understanding typifies for the subject a certain segment of mankind or perhaps all humans or all beings, i.e., humanity and nature, or the all-pervading source of being, God, then the subject will experience communion with all those beings which are exemplified for him by the person understanding, and do this to the degree that this person is perceived as their representative.

COMPARISON WITH OTHER APPROACHES

Phenomenal analysis will give a descriptive definition of certain experiences which people in a given culture or subculture have in common. The experimental psychologist who works with the phenomenal method need, however, not stop here; he may from the descriptive definition yielded by the analysis deduce a number of testable hypotheses and submit these to experimental test (2, 5, 6, 12). An example of such a study is that by Ex and Bruyn (3) on the influence of mental set on perception of identity and substitution. They found that paired subjects who have an intimate relationship with each other tend in their judgment to shift less toward the direction of the

deviating judgment of their partner, than paired subjects who do not have such an intimate relationship. From a study such as this it becomes clear that there is no difference whatsoever in the technique of experimentation itself, with its functional-operational-statistical mechanics, as employed in phenomenological and in other psychologies.

Regarding the operations in the phenomenal analysis itself, a certain similarity to the usual analysis of an open-end question in an opinion survey will have been noted. The difference between the two methods is essentially one of objective. The phenomenal analyst will restrict himself to one question, carefully aimed at obtaining spontaneous descriptions of subjective experience, and it will be formulated so that the subjects will be able to relate freely a wide variety of situations. The purpose is to discover the moments common to all individual experiences of the same kind. The survey analyst, on the other hand, typically uses a number of questions, which will be formulated so as to obtain the specific reactions of certain populations to definite objects, persons, or events. His purpose is to understand a human experience not as such, but as an indicator of the way in which people are related to certain objects in a certain social environment. From this main difference certain differences in analyzing the data follow, which shall, however, not be presented here.

In general, the differences between the phenomenological approach and that of other psychologies lie not so much in the method as in philosophic assumptions, the nature of the hypotheses, the application of the results, and the areas of fundamental concern. While the old introspectionism was based on rationalism, and behaviorism is based on positivism, phenomenal-existential psychology is rooted in an original synthesis of certain tenets of positivism and rationalism, and of phenomenology and existentialism. A synthetic system of intelligible constructs, based on philosophical assumptions and tested out gradually, is still in its early phase in phenomenal-existential psychology. It is developing differently from that of other systems inasmuch as it is mainly concerned with the laws which govern human experience.

In forming hypotheses, phenomenal psychology tends to start from an overall analysis of the human situation in its immediate givenness; whereas introspectionism started from "objects" which were supposed to be inside the mind, isolated from the total existential situation; and behaviorism starts from the external aspects of be-

havior, isolated from their experiential content. The overall analysis by the phenomenologist of the concrete human situation in its givenness leads to a complex qualitative description of the experiences in those situations, as we have seen above, from which further testable hypotheses may be deduced. The older psychologies tend to reduce the givenness of the situation much earlier to testable hypotheses. The result is that their hypotheses look quite different and—at least in the opinion of the phenomenal psychologist—have less bearing on the concrete condition of human existence.

Regarding application, the results of phenomenal psychology seem to be of more use in meeting the deeper layers of common human existence, the concern of the present study. To the extent that phenomenal psychology is also and primarily interested in the explication of an experience in its individual givenness, its results are useful in problems of therapy and counseling, interpretation of personality tests, development of personality, creativity and human relationships (10, 11). The results of traditional academic psychologies seem to be of greater use in the construction of intelligence and aptitude tests, in problems of sensory perception, human engineering, mechanical learning, and industrial psychology. It is apparent, then, that the results of both kinds of psychology do not exclude each other but complement each other.

REFERENCES

1. ASCH, S. E. *Social psychology*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1953.
2. EX, J. *Situatie-Analyse en sociaal-psychologisch Experiment*. Bussum, Holland: Paul Brand, 1957.
3. EX, J., & BRUYN, G. L. DE. An experimental study on the influence of the mental set on the perception of identity and substitution. *Acta psychol.*, 1956, 12, 198-208.
4. KOEHLER, W. *The place of value in a world of facts*. New York: Liveright, 1938.
5. LINSCHOTEN, J. *Das Experiment in der phänomenologischen Psychologie*. Unpublished. Bonn, 1955.
6. MACLEOD, R. B. The phenomenological approach to social psychology. *Psychol. Rev.*, 1947, 54, 193-210.
7. MACLEOD, R. B. The place of phenomenological analysis in social psychological theory. In J. H. Rohrer, & M. Sherif (Eds.), *Social psychology at the crossroads*. New York: Harper, 1951. Pp. 215-241.
8. MERLEAU-PONTY, M. *La structure du comportement*. Paris: Presses Univer. France, 1942.
9. MERLEAU-PONTY, M. *La phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Gallimard, 1945.
10. STRASSER, S. Phenomenological trends in European psychology. *Phil. phenomenol. Res.*, 1957, 18, 18-34.
11. VAN DEN BERG, J. H. *The phenomenological approach to psychiatry*. Springfield, Ill.: C. C. Thomas, 1955.
12. WELLEK, A. The phenomenological and experimental approach to psychology and characterology. In H. P. David, & H. von Bracken (Eds.), *Perspectives in personality theory*. New York: Basic Books, 1957. Pp. 278-299.