

**Theories, Experiencing and “Knowing”  
In Encounter with  
Focusing Oriented Therapy**

Focusing and Focusing Oriented Therapy (PPSYC5853)

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## Negotiating Enquiry

I recently completed a course on focusing and focusing oriented therapy, and have an assignment to write “a scholarly paper,” of “critical discussion” in which I will “argue critically and originally based upon my own experiencing”(Madison, 2011 a, p. 3). Gendlin, the originator of focusing and focusing oriented therapy, has directed us to be careful about how words “fit” our experience. Many meanings of “critical” and “scholarly seem to point to observation, thinking and how something “looks”, perhaps when being carefully examined from many angles. There is not much about feeling and experience here.

But “arguing clearly based on experience”, seems to point to meanings of critical where what Gendlin calls “the felt sense” can enter. I realize that the “felt sense” involves a new sense of the word critical, that will require me to check what I read, think, and do against the whole of my evolving experience. I turn in the dictionary to the connected definition of “new criticism” which is “ marked by concentration on language, imagery, and emotional or intellectual tensions “ ([www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com)).

I am not “picking words” here. I am trying not to do a new thing in an old way. Jesus might call it not putting new wine in old wineskins.

I am finding a “felt sense” of this assignment. I have engaged with the language, and sensed tensions in the assignment for me. I am writing differently; it’s a new kind of knowing. I am attempting to let this paper be what “it” wants to be. I am interested in how to bring my own experience, my “felt sense” into relationship to psychological theories and analytical thinking – what my head does as I write this paper, and what I am trying to move toward in my therapeutic work with clients. There is something important here – a new way of bringing what I learn, read, experience, and in some sense ‘know’ (for it seems that my own experience is to be a base) into what I say, write, and do, and in fact who I am with clients.

Gendlin (1996) helped me understand why this “new thing” is so difficult. “At first, a new idea cannot be expressed because the available words mean something else.” He suggests that greater precision is first articulated “clumsily, in odd new phrases” seeking “verbalizations that carry

the felt sense forward” (p. 179). Gendlin (2009) noticed how old words, big words, can “come in new phrases with new meanings which are drawn from, and somehow involve implicit context, and which do not lose their connection with this implicit context (p. 149). He suggested that we maintain contact with the implicit context when we apply concepts, “to find just what strand of its meaning was at work” and then turning to find how it lifted out something relevant (p. 150). His approach suggests revisiting time with clients, to ask, “Why did this concept seem to fit? What was at work?” And then going further into new, “fresh” understanding. In other words, he invites me to constantly check all received theories and understanding against evolving implicit experience, or Gendlin’s “felt sense” both when I am with a client, and as I later reflect on concepts that help me notice something about our interaction.

### **Focusing- Oriented Psychotherapy**

The ideas and suggested approaches from a close reading of some of Gendlin’s books and articles are still sitting in me, new, as I write. I am still choosing and using Gendlin’s and Todres’ words somewhat awkwardly – trying to sense in them new ways of thinking, feeling, and being with clients.

In *Theory of Personality Change* (1964), Gendlin was interested in a deeper understanding of how change happens. He believed that coming to the body helps us come into the present moment, in which thoughts, feelings, and experiences are all implicit. (p. 10). He described “direct reference” as staying with this implicit more than one yet can say” (p. 11-12), and felt that this intricate whole, complexity and multiplicity could be contacted and related to through focusing on this bodily felt sense. Gendlin (1996) noticed how attending to that felt sense brings relief, and described the process of focusing as “a systematic, knowing way to let something implicit open”(p.53). He observed how this opening/ unfolding brings changes in the feeling and quality of the problem which is often accompanied or followed by insight and understanding.

In *Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy* (1996), Gendlin teaches us to “become more exact and specific about how to engender this inward coming of an unclear whole”(p. 55), and how to attend, or “dispose attention”, so that the felt sense may come. Gendlin found that reflection, a process of

checking felt senses by hearing them reflected in someone else's voice, could support a strengthening and clarification of feeling, felt sense, and thought (p. 11). This reflection requires presence to both self and other, in which what is said is taken in and "digested" into your being, so that what was heard can be reflected back from your whole body. Gendlin (2009) found that focusing can lead to a continuous carrying forward of experience, when what was spoken articulates and explains what before been understood only implicitly. (p. 150). He emphasized the importance of feeling in relationship as a context for change: "Relationship and what one lives within oneself in the relationship are not different . . . A new and positive living process will soon conform its contents positively" (p. 148).

What is new in focusing is the way that clients are coached and enabled to check and evaluate the experiential effects of what happens in therapy, through what they and their therapist might say, and in their experience together. Gendlin (1996) demonstrates teaching clients how to focus their attention "in this odd way" (p. 69), so that they can learn to take in interpretations and check them inwardly. He described numerous techniques (eg. finding and using "handle words" to invite the felt sense to show a bit more) that support clients to enter further into direct experience (pp48-56).

Gendlin (in Zeig, 1997) sometimes describes focusing as a specific process that can be combined with any therapy, to "open a central spot that was long left in a kind of twilight. . . I have specified it, so that it can be found easily, taught, and used"(p. 199). However, in *Focusing -Oriented Psychotherapy* (1997) he explores more fully and subtly the relationship between focusing and other therapeutic approaches.

### **Gendlin and Other Theoretical Approaches, Methods and Procedures**

Gendlin (1996) feared that particular orientations and methods arising out of different spirits, or cultures (p. 169), have the capacity to distract and confuse therapists by leading them to miss the unpredictability of the next bit of experiential differentiation (p 172). While accepting that theories may seem contradictory, Gendlin maintains that the concrete experiences they help us find and open in clients do not carry such contradictions.

He saw the value in theories as their capacity to locate experiences that might otherwise have been missed, and the value of concepts to be in “whole open reaches of human experience” that they can be used to open, from which steps of change can be generated (pp. 2-3). He says that theories or procedures, while vital, must be used to find something we can try without imposing on, or losing contact with clients (p. 172). Bodily, experiential responses that move and carry forward the process become the touchstone for evaluating the success of all interventions. Gendlin expresses a light, almost playful approach to theory, suggesting that when it leads to nothing that is experienced, “we put it aside for the moment.” (pp. 2-3).

While acknowledging the impossibility of integrating overlapping orientations or unspecified procedures he suggested grouping interventions and procedures from different theoretical orientations and approaches into pools of similar therapeutic experience: “images, role play, words, cognitive beliefs, memories, feelings, emotional catharsis, interpersonal interactions, dreams, muscle movement, and habitual behavior”(p. 170). He termed these pools “avenues” to emphasize the importance of how a procedure is used. Learning procedures from different orientations helps us understand the characteristics of an avenue, and helps us develop specific sensitivities so that we can use that procedure in ways that take account of what other procedures in that avenue have taught. (p. 171)

Gendlin feels that allowing each therapeutic avenue to contribute its particular characteristic dimensions and unique ways of engendering new and freeing bodily energy frees therapists to experiment. Each procedure on an avenue can be broken up into a useful repertory of small-scale moves which can be fitted to each moment of change, as determined by the felt sense. (For example, in dream interpretation he suggests using “all the theoretical systems to generate small-scale questions, until the dream is interpreted in terms of concretely experienced steps arising in the client’s body”(p. 202). He notes that often we can only retrospectively see the theory and steps that could have led to the experiential shift observed (p. 27).

## **Gendlin and psychodynamic Approaches**

My practicum experience has been one of learning and applying psychodynamic theory and approaches to counseling. I have engaged with theories of object relations that grapple with the effects of how people have internally experienced and represented their relationships with others, as well as the ways in which defenses develop as a way of managing internal and external experience. I have found some Jungian approaches personally helpful.

James Hillman, a prominent Jungian, responded to Gendlin's presentation at the third "Evolution of Psychotherapy" Conference by noting similarities between Gendlin's felt sense and Jungian archetypal energy and images. He observed that all of these energies know why they are there and what they want, and all support movement into imagery and active imagination (in Zeig, 1997 pp. 210-211).

Like Hillman, I find that Gendlin's felt sense resonates with understandings, approaches and interventions I have used in the past, and sensitizes me to language or ways of being that help me connect with responses in clients. The focusing course felt like finishing school for my other experiences and study, as it reminds me that experience always exceeds concepts (Gendlin, 1997, p. 1), and that I need to set "all that" to the side, close, so that I can access it as needed, as I primarily attend to experience with the person in front of me, who is always "freshly there" (p. 172).

## **How Therapy "Works"**

Like most methods of psychodynamic psychotherapy, focusing intends to work at the edge, or zone between consciousness and the unconscious (1996, p. 69). Reminding therapists of Freud's direction to attend to the *effect* of interpretations, Gendlin noted that interpretations of the "why" of psychological difficulties do not always lead to change (p. 12). He is less interested in unconscious material that does not bring change in clients' present experiencing, instead seeking those edges and direct bodily senses that can serve as an entry point into experiential process. He notes research indicating that patients who can find and work at these edges have most success in therapy (p.69). He locates change in "a shift in the concrete bodily way you have the problem, and not *only* in a new way of thinking." (p.9)

Fenichel (1945) evaluated the effectiveness of interpretations by the degree to which they allow the discharge of formerly repressed experiences and feelings (as cited in Gendlin, 1996, p. 10). In this way, interpretations support clients' access to experiences, feelings, and ways of being that they would rather not look at or be conscious of. Gendlin (1996) describes how focusing enables clients to relate more familiarly with emotion and experiences, touching them "again and again at will", (p. 13). Such steps bring perspective and change, as clients distinguish who they are from experiences and feelings they have learned to be "with" (p. 20).

Gendlin defines pathological content as experiences that cannot develop into what they could be (p. 38). He notes how carrying forward can allow previously missed or blocked further experiencing of an important aspect of the client to happen, bringing a carrying forward that allows the whole to develop into what it inherently needs to become (p. 38). Client and therapist come to know that what appeared negative contains positive life energy that is only twisted or blocked, and can change its form as it is carried forward in further steps. Through carrying forward, clients learn to live old problems in ways that become the positive opposite of the old negative manner, bringing "a truth of change and development in the whole mesh of experience" (p. 36).

Gendlin describes steps in the direction of growth as expansion at the central core that can bring renewed interest and playfulness to living. "Clients feel their own separate existence solidly enough to want to be close to others as they really are." (pp.21-22) They discover a new sureness in perceptions and evaluations, as they find a more authentic sense of self, new capacity to stand behind their words, and feel "tricklings of energy" seeking life and development (p. 22).

I experience a feeling of recognition as I read and write these descriptions; they "fit" my own experience, both as client and as therapist. Perhaps taking in words carved out from seasoned therapists' experience with clients is not so different from the way Gendlin suggests trying questions, helping clients find just the right words, to "fit" and carry forward experience. These words have named for me what it has been like when therapy works. With my felt sense, they will guide me as a way of checking further experience.

## **Embodied Knowing**

Like phenomenology, focusing requires a new discipline of privileging current experience and attention to consciousness. However, unlike traditional phenomenology, focusing involves not so much a bracketing of earlier received conceptions and understandings as it is finding these understandings and conceptions within, in a new way.

Focusing gives me a way to move toward embodying concepts, language, image, dream, and experience in a total process of “felt sense” in being with an other in therapy. I borrow from my Jungian experience the sense an alchemical process (which Jungians I know term “sublation”) of letting experience and understanding soak in and work in you, transforming you into something new that includes “bits” of the old that are now in an entirely different relationship to each other. This experience seems to resonate with Gendlin’s description of the way in which new wholes of experience are continually forming.

This larger sense of mind is not chopped into emotion and cognition. Madison, (2011 b) refers to “experience available to you which is more than ‘just’ thinking or ‘just’ feeling, but rather a holistic sense of THINK/FEEL: you have a thought and simultaneously have a sensed or felt experience of the general quality of “the whole thing” inside you.”

Les Todres (2007) offers ideas about this new thinking/feeling way of being and knowing as he explores embodied processes of communication and transformation in his approach to psychotherapy (p. 56). He sees the purpose of such knowing as “making sense of all that we are in relationship with, and how we act in such contexts (p. 32). He believes that “embodying is where being and knowing meet”(p. 20).

Drawing extensively from Gendlin, Todres sees “intimate participation in life and the inhabiting of the lived body in interaction with its world as primary sources, if not the very ground, of knowing that makes language meaningful and possible (p. 33). This knowing requires experiencing oneself “ in a different manner of interaction”, and approaching oneself “inwardly in a different manner” (p. 51) with “what one finds inside” being made directly from “how one is concretely living just then” (p. 124).



Todres suggested that the body provides the texture of enacted, embodied flow in the sequence of lived existence that is neither too fixed or too disembodied. Drawing from Gendlin (1997), he suggests that we must dwell in the pre-separated multiplicity, which can be carried forward to open new possibilities that were not separately there before (p. 33).

Todres points towards an attitude of 'unknowing' and attention to the 'more' within the body which is "finely ordered but un-finished"(p.176). Following his example and my experience in the focusing course, I am learning to attend in ways in which "complexity and richness emerge," rather than engaging in a "structure bound process of defining self, other, and world," which objectifies, and freezes "the openness and rhythm of going-on-being. (160-161). I have shifted from counseling to sensing for a new way of being with clients that helps them deepen their relationship with their deepest, truest selves.

Gendlin gave me a profound new understanding of Roger's condition of genuineness in counseling, saying that therapists must learn to find and access their own implicit meanings (really, all that they are in the moment), and then use these meanings seamlessly, in a way that is not structure bound, so that clients can be newly, freshly understood (Gendlin, 1964, p. 19).

### **Languaging**

Todres (2007) noted that formulating and using language creates some distance from experience. This analysis of lived through experience provides structure, pulls out themes, discovers the boundaries of what we explicitly know. The essence of providing therapy may lie in the challenge of maintaining both the closeness of engaged intimacy and the distance of bringing things to explicit language- what we know for now. (p. 32). Therapy that enacts this rhythm provides the relational texture of embodied knowing and the making explicit of newly structured language that Todres describes as embodied knowing grounded in both head and heart (p. 56).

Bodily responsiveness/felt sense can then confirm the lived relevance of meanings that have been made explicit as well as opening up more intricate meanings going forward. The embodied enquiry of psychotherapy becomes a hermeneutic circle (p.10), opening up more intricacy and complexity, with aliveness and responsiveness that invites relationship (p. 345).

Todres contrasts embodied knowing with disembodied knowing, which he describes as “plausible abstract models or explanations that cannot easily be brought into the light of one’s own lived possibilities.”(p. 5). He warns against concepts degenerating into free -floating theses, without understanding. Both Todres and Gendlin helped me learn to both ask and recognize whether language and concepts “worked” by noticing the extent to which they support or distract clients from attending to their own experiencing,

I have historically sometimes experienced a sense of disconnection as I have tried to communicate concepts (which I think I have “got”) to others who may not have been exposed to them, or who I experience as “not having not got them”. For me, it is the experience of my words returning to me, empty.

The process of investigating and discussing ideas and experience changed as a result of my experience during the focusing course. Some of the richness of *Focusing -Oriented Psychotherapy* lies in the way it demonstrates language that can support and enable a client’s attention to and checking of their inner experience.

I paid particular attention to the language that carried the experience of this new way of being with others. The somewhat narcissistic sense of disconnection I have sometimes experienced as I’ve tried to communicate concepts happens noticeably less when I ask: “Does that fit for you?” This question brings a shift from naming what or how someone *is* to trying to track and follow and be with the understandings and experience between us. The door is open for us to explore them further, together. I am now trying to sense for the right question, rightly timed and asked, so that something barely intuited can begin to show itself.

When I ask “How does that sit with you?” it acknowledges that I am interested in the effect of my words in them, and signals that I am interested in their on-going response. Combined with my way of speaking and being as I say it, I hope that it expresses an invitation that the meanings will continue to evolve between us.

I noted many more phrases like this that shifted us out of an attitude of positivism into an expansive, exploratory new way of being-with-others. If I can find how to be and talk with this acknowledged sense of “between-ness” between me and others, will this new important experience

of evolving being-together continue? If clients can learn this way of being with others, and of tracking their own shifting experience with others, what new open-ness and possibility might come into being for them?

## **Conclusion**

Gendlin suggests that any method we might try must come out of our own zone between consciousness and the unconscious and “must quickly become continuous with what arises from inside the client”, so that we can “live from far down all the way out into action and speech” (Zeig, p. 206). When the process is going well, I am not doing, attempting, trying. (One client remarked “You don’t work me.”) Rather, I experience myself as already *being* “in my body”, and our interaction “is” the process, in which new meanings, experiences, and possibilities will emerge. This involves being with my deeper, embodied ideas *and* experiencing, as they come to me moment by moment.

A dream that I brought to focusing in class helped me explore another dimension of this tension between embodied being and trying to “know”. The night before, I had counselled a red-headed client who has been in therapy for many years, who many therapists would likely diagnose as borderline. In my dream, a red kitten maraudes through the house. There is a woman who keeps picking at her with chopsticks, having been told that the kitten should not be there. In the process of focusing with the dream in class, I learned to appreciate the kitty’s bodily energy. Focusing on the chopsticks in the dream, I discovered that they were very heavy. Although in the dream, they had only seemed to catch wisps of fur, in the process of focusing, it seemed that they were somehow hurting the kitty.

As I reflected on the dream, there was process of first noticing how general energies of feeling and being (the orange kitty) were relating to thinking or judgment (for me, the witch-like woman with chopsticks). The dream of course has much more in it, but for the purpose of this paper, as I focus on this dream, I notice and acknowledge the tension I sometimes experience between feeling and thinking. I realize that I have not yet learned to relate these two aspects in a trusting way.

This dream accompanied me as I was with other students in the week long intensive focusing course. I continue to feel and work with these energies of being and knowing as I read about focusing and other theoretical approaches and as I work with clients,

Carrying forward the experience from this dream, I invite my thinking and my concepts and sense that I know to move to the back of the centre of my body. I ask them to become softer, gentler, less probing, (invasive?), less analytical (separating, tearing, pulling apart?). I am asking this “it” to be less defensive, less assertive. I am inviting “it” to shift toward quieter discernment, gentler knowledge, with greater respect and appreciation for tact, timing, and the experience of the other. This will require an on-going sifting of what I’ve been exposed to, and who I have been, and a fundamental, radical opening to the other and to our evolving experience together,

Despite starting out with the intent of writing a critical, scholarly, paper, I observe that what I have written is in fact a more personal, integrative paper, as I have attempted to absorb Gendlin’s ideas and approach as deeply as I am able, making them part of my self and the way in which I relate to clients. These are the words I have for now, and the way that I am currently able to put them together.

The whole emerges, new again, today. Both the embodied wholeness and the words continue to shift and change as I write and do the best work I am capable of with clients. What is important is that I continue to find and check the felt sense of my knowing being, and experiencing – and bring that to clients as we attempt to each day find what Gendlin calls “fresh air”(p. 134) together.

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