

Gendlin and New Phenomenology: The Application to Rehabilitation Medicine

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Abstract

This paper clarifies the content of the “new phenomenology” proposed by Eugene Gendlin and examines its possibilities. Gendlin is a prominent researcher in the field of clinical psychology, having invented a counseling technique called “Focusing.” Parallel to his research in clinical psychology and psychotherapy, he also pursued studies in philosophy. Gendlin’s “Theory of Experiencing” is the philosophy underlying Focusing. In it, he emphasizes that bodily feeling, or felt sense, plays an important role in thinking and cognition. The felt sense, in particular, has the power to create new meanings, and this is what causes the effects of Focusing. Gendlin envisioned a new phenomenology by introducing this speaking from felt sense into phenomenological description. In conventional phenomenology, phenomenological description is supposed to capture the essence of experience, but in Gendlin’s new phenomenology, the phenomenological first-person description has the creativity to discover new aspects of experience. Gendlin’s new phenomenology is specifically developed in his theory of metaphor. Metaphor-based descriptions bring about new awareness and transform self-understanding. This paper argues that his theory of metaphor can be applied to rehabilitation medicine. It offers the possibility that patients with physical paralysis will find new meanings and new understandings of their bodies and derive benefits from rehabilitation by describing their own physical experiences using metaphors.

Key words: Phenomenology, Theory of Experiencing, Embodiment, Focusing, Rehabilitation Medicine

1. Introduction

Phenomenology was originally conceived as embracing considerations of “corporeality” or “embodiment.” In the latter half of the 20th century, embodied mind and embodied cognition have begun to attract attention in cognitive science and artificial intelligence research. This is because the view that intelligence is not a function that is completed in the mind and works independently and constantly, but rather one that emerges in the interaction between the brain, body, space, relationships, and situations became more prevalent. In line with this trend, attention to the “phenomenology of the body” has been increasing in recent years.

Eugene Gendlin (1926–2017) is a psychologist and philosopher who proposed a theory that emphasizes the function of the body in thought and cognition. He was a prominent clinical psychologist and psychotherapist who devised a counseling technique called focusing. However, he also continued his philosophical research and proposed his “Theory of Experiencing,” which states that we can create new concepts and new meanings through the interaction between the logical thinking of the mind and the vague and pre-linguistic feelings of the body.

The purpose of this paper is to characterize his philosophical theory, which Gendlin himself called “new phenomenology,” and to consider what possibilities it holds. In what follows, I will review Gendlin’s philosophy. He called his own philosophy a “new phenomenology,” and I will consider what constitutes this “newness” of his phenomenology (Sect. 2). I will then discuss Gendlin’s theory of experiencing. This theory is the basis of his new phenomenology. In it, Gendlin investigates the interaction of language, feeling, and experience. I will focus on his discussion of metaphor (Sect. 3). Subsequently, I will talk about

the possibilities of Gendlin's philosophy. I am currently working with physical therapists, speech-language pathologists, and clinical psychologists on a research project to apply Gendlin's theory of metaphor to rehabilitation medicine. I will argue for the potential of his theory of metaphor (Sect. 4).

2. Gendlin's new phenomenology

2.1 Gendlin's Profile

I would like to start with a brief biography of Gendlin. Eugene Gendlin was born in Vienna in 1926. The political situation in Austria compelled him and his family to move to the United States in 1939. He entered the University of Chicago, majoring in philosophy, and studied Dilthey's philosophy, phenomenology, and pragmatism. In 1950, he received his M. A. in "Wilhelm Dilthey and the Problem of Comprehending Human Significance in the Science of Man." In 1958, he submitted his doctoral dissertation, "The function of experiencing in symbolization." Gendlin revised and retitled it and published "Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning. A philosophical and psychological approach to the subjective" in 1962. He was appointed to the Department of Behavioral Sciences at the University of Chicago, and he subsequently published lots of articles on philosophy, psychotherapy, and clinical psychology, for which he received some awards from the American Psychological Association and was highly regarded in the clinical psychology community. He passed away in 2017.

2.2 What is Focusing and Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy?

His proposal of focusing and Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy has made Gendlin a famous name in clinical psychology. What is focusing, what is Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy? And why did he conceive of focusing even

though he had studied Dilthey's philosophy, phenomenology, and pragmatism?

While writing his master's thesis, Gendlin attended seminars by Professor Carl Rogers, a famous psychologist who founded client-centered therapy. Gendlin does not clearly state his motivation for his interest in Rogers' psychology. I think that the similarities between client-centered therapy and Dilthey's philosophy are one of the reasons for this.

Dilthey attempted to base human science (*Geisteswissenschaft* in German), examining its unique methods and significance as distinct from natural science. He considered the artworks, literature, historical events, etc. as expressions of the spirit, and understanding them was taken to be the work of human science. In Rogers' client-centered therapy, the main goal of counseling is for the client to talk about her or his own experiences and for the therapist to listen to and understand them. Both Dilthey and Rogers emphasize the framework of experience-expression-understanding. I consider that this similarity led Gendlin to take an interest in Rogers' seminars.

In the seminars Gendlin noticed that in some cases psychological counseling caused certain effects and in others, it did not, despite the same involvement with the clients. And Gendlin explored the difference between them.

After analyzing a large number of counseling recordings, Gendlin found that the key to successful counseling is not what clients say, but how they say. The way of speaking is to touch a feeling ("felt sense" in his terminology) that the client directly feels bodily but cannot verbalize well, and then to speak with or from the felt sense.

When clients speak from their own felt sense in counseling, even if what they say is contradictory, it triggers a release from stress or fixed negative mental states. From this finding, Gendlin created a methodology called

focusing, a counseling technique called focusing-oriented psychotherapy, as a process of focusing on felt sense and verbalizing it.

2.3 Theory of Experiencing as the Foundation for Focusing

Gendlin's philosophy behind the conception of the focusing is called the theory of experiencing and is discussed in detail in his first book. What kind of philosophy is it?

I will review the outline. As already mentioned, the most important point in psychological counseling is not what the clients say, but how they say it. In other words, it is not the "content" of the client's experience, but the "function" of how the client is undergoing the experience. Therefore, Gendlin distinguished between experience as something constituted by contents and experiencing as the process which is lived by the subject.

It [experience] must be thought of as that partly unformed stream of feeling that we have every moment. I shall call it "experiencing," using that term for the flow of feeling, concretely, to which you can every moment attend inwardly, if you wish. (Gendlin 1962: 3)

Because the experiencing is a dynamic process, it is not definitively grasped by logical concepts, but rather is "something that is felt vaguely and bodily." "Experiencing" can be paraphrased as pre-conceptual meaning, experiential meaning, felt sense, the more, the intricacy, implicit understanding, etc.

Gendlin argues that the felt sense is bodily. His use of the word "body" has a broad meaning, referring not only to the "physiological body," but also to feelings, emotions, situations, and atmospheres beyond the scope of the intellect. Gendlin's findings show that when clients focus on and speak from the

felt sense of their situation rather than a rational understanding of it, positive effects in counseling can be expected. Speaking from felt sense can create new meanings and trigger counseling effects.

Taken broadly, one of the causes of psychological disorders or mental health problems is said to be “structure bound.” This means that the client perceives her or his situation negatively and is not flexible enough to accept it. The new meaning carries forward the client’s self-understanding, loosens structure bounds, and leads to a liberation of the mental states. It makes the client aware of the different aspects of the situation, distances the client from the negative aspects, and allows the client to move in a different direction. It is the creativity of the felt sense that can bring about this effect of focusing.

2.4 Basis for the Creation of Meaning

So why is speaking with and from felt sense capable of creating new meaning? What is the reason that felt sense can be claimed to be creative? Again, it seems to me that Gendlin does not provide a clear reason. I would like to offer my interpretation, based on his theory.

Felt sense can create new meaning because it interacts with language (symbols in the broadest sense), and there is a gap between the two. In Gendlin’s definition, felt sense is always more than language, it is called the more and the intricacy. It is always functioning in our thinking and speaking. “The more is always available whenever we think or speak” (Gendlin 2017: 97). Felt sense has also been called “a large mass of undifferentiated experience” (Gendlin 1962: 151). We focus on the inexpressible, undifferentiated felt sense and attempt to verbalize it. When a part of felt sense is symbolized, some previously unnoticed fragments of it are exposed. One notices simultaneously that there is an even greater part of the felt sense that

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has not yet been expressed. The felt sense is an inexhaustible whole. It interacts with symbols, changing them while creating novelty in both felt sense and symbols. Gendlin argues that this is the essential way of experiencing.

We can think of the creativity of interaction in two ways. The first way is “communication with oneself.” We construct in our minds what we are going to say and what we want to say. Then we express them in a specific language (English, Icelandic, Japanese, Chinese...). In our everyday life, we do not speak in this way. Rather, usually we think as we speak, and speak as we think. Therefore, when we put into words what we feel, we are not only communicating something to others but also to ourselves. So, our words can create the meanings that bring new awareness to us. The second way is the difference between felt sense and symbol. Words are universal and general as long as they function as words. On the other hand, felt sense is a feeling that I have “at this moment, in this situation,” and is thoroughly individual and special. Felt sense always has much richer contents than language. Therefore, even if one tries to describe felt sense in words, there are always parts that cannot be expressed well. No matter how much we make full use of words, we have experiences that transcend them, which in turn prompt new expressions.

We do sense more meaning than we have symbolized... We employ symbols, but invariably the processes of meaning that occur exceeds the meanings that are symbolized. (Gendlin 1962: 72)

This paragraph is summarized thus: The felt sense is always more and much more complex than words or symbols. In interaction, the gap, the difference between the two, demands a different symbolization and, at the same time, prompts us to feel more deeply. As a result, new meanings, and new

awareness arise. The creation of new meaning makes effective counseling possible.

2.5 What is Gendlin's new phenomenology?

Next, I will talk about Gendlin's new phenomenology.

I show a new approach to what phenomenologists call "phenomena," a deliberate way to *think and speak with* what is more than categories (concepts, theories, assumptions, distinctions...). Some categories are always implicit in language, and language is always implicit in any human experiencing. (Gendlin 2004: 127)

Gendlin introduces to phenomenology a method of using what is more than categories, a method of using felt sense.

Symbolizing an experience or describing an experience, reveals the essential structure of the experience. In Husserl's terms, the structures of consciousness such as intentionality, noesis-noema, retention-impression-protention, etc. are grasped. Gendlin says that Husserl's phenomenology is a prior form of Gendlin's theory of experiencing.

Husserl may be said to be the first to base philosophy, quite explicitly and deliberately, on an examination of experiencing as we actually live, have, and are, ... (Gendlin 2017: 50)

Both phenomenologists and Gendlin begin their philosophical consideration by describing experiences or by symbolizing experiences. The description brings to light particular ways of life and the structure of experience behind the

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phenomenon. What Gendlin tries to add to phenomenology is that describing an experience, as we have seen earlier, changes the experience and further description, carrying forward the experience. The speaking affects the feeling of the speaking, which again changes the speaking. Thus it is a continuous creation of meaning. This cyclical interaction of experiencing and symbols is what Gendlin calls "reflexivity." Reflexivity is one of the most important characteristics of Gendlin's philosophy and the basis for his new phenomenology.

The main significance of our reflexivity is that, since we refer to experiencing directly both in assertions and in our method of reaching these assertions, naturally then, what we assert of experience must apply also to experience as we have been employing it to reach these assertions. (Gendlin 1962: 201)

Gendlin proposes that what we have said about an experience also applies to the experiencing that we used to reach these assertions, thereby adding the aspect of the creation of new meaning to phenomenological description, which he called the "phenomenology of carrying forward." The phenomenology of carrying forward not only reveals the essence of experience by describing it but also makes us aware of new aspects of experience and creates a new relationship between the subject and the world.

But as philosophers and phenomenologists we want to think with, from, and into this unclear but more precise demanding edge, and think into this coming of words. When we then speak from there, these three words "language," "concept," and "body" will have

acquired more meanings. (Gendlin 2004: 132)

From Gendlin's point of view, Husserl also used reflexivity in his phenomenological descriptions and continued to create new meanings of experience.

Husserl discovered what I call "the intricacy." And then he did not stop short of it, as so many others did. He entered it and classified a thousand or so facets, like Adam in Paradise naming all the animals.... If we enter further into the intricacy here, we find carrying forward. (Gendlin 2004: 138)

Thus, Gendlin points out that the creativity through the reflexive interaction between felt sense and symbols is inherent in the experience of phenomenological description, and he insists on consciously using it as a method of phenomenology. This is his new phenomenology, the phenomenology of carrying forward.

3. The theory of metaphor as new phenomenology

How can we actually use this method of new phenomenology? Gendlin's own proposal would be a method for Focusing and TAE (Thinking at the Edge). However, I believe that Gendlin's theory of metaphor is truly a new phenomenology. In this chapter, I will talk about his theory of metaphor.

3.1 Functional relationship between felt sense and symbols

Gendlin discusses how felt sense and symbols function in cognition, in Chapter 3 of his book *ECM*. The interactions between them are divided into

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two groups, with seven different functions.

Parallel relationships: “direct reference,” “recognition,” “explication.”

Non-parallel relationships: “metaphor,” “comprehension,” “relevance,”
and “circumlocution.”

According to Gendlin, the parallel relationship is one in which there is a one-to-one correspondence between felt sense and symbols, while a non-parallel one is not. It is a difference in the way symbols are used.

Later we shall discuss the genesis of “familiar” symbols. For the moment we are discussing “recognition,” which concerns only such symbols as already are for us in a one-to-one relationship with certain felt meanings in the sense that they call forth these felt meanings when we meet the symbols. (Gendlin 1962: 101)

In parallel relationships, we use socially and conventionally shared symbols and immediately can understand their meanings. In other words, the combination of symbols and felt sense is familiar. The parallel relationships are a function in a stable progression of experience. Expressed in Husserl's phenomenology, it is a state in which empty signitive intentions are continuously filled by intuitive intentions and a uniform harmonic experience (*Einmümmigkeit der Erfahrung* in Husserl's term) proceeds.

In contrast, in non-parallel relationships, new meanings are created through unusual uses of language. Gendlin considers this phenomenon at length. The creation of new meaning is what underlies the effectiveness of focusing.

3.2 Non-parallel relationships, the theory of metaphor

Non-parallel relationships are those in which new meanings and situations are created by the interaction of felt sense with unfamiliar and strange symbols. In this section, I will discuss only metaphor.

In non-parallel relationships, the interaction of felt sense and symbols causes us to feel something different. We feel a gap. This gap can make us aware of new meanings.

The symbols have a new meaning as they mean the new aspect of experience. The aspect of experience brought forth by the metaphor is brought forth *by the metaphor*. (Gendlin 1962: 114)

Many would agree with the idea that metaphors not only express something rhetorically, but also make us aware of some new meaning. The distinctive feature of Gendlin's theory of metaphor is that it has a functional definition. According to Gendlin's functional definition, the distinction between literal and metaphorical expressions depends on whether they create a new felt sense. For example, the sentence "The capital of Iceland is Reykjavik" is usually understood as literal. But if the sentence functions to create some new felt sense for me, it is a metaphor. When I see a sentence, it interacts with the whole felt sense of my situation.

The dictionary doesn't know my situation. My body brings the words directly from living in situations, so they say something relevant to a situation. (Gendlin 2017: 121)

The interaction among body, situation, felt sense, and words brings me new

meanings beyond literal expressions. Defining this as a function of metaphor is a characteristic of Gendlin's theory.

Felt sense is a bodily felt pre-linguistic whole. When we try to symbolize it, we may not be able to express it in a familiar or literal way. When we use a new, unfamiliar expression or metaphor, the whole felt sense reveals aspects that we were not aware of (or more precisely, vaguely and implicitly felt in the body, but not explicitly and explicitly captured), and a new understanding of self and experience arises. Thus, a new self-understanding and new understanding of the experience are created.

Consequently, what will this theory of metaphor and his new phenomenology based on it bring to us? I would like to discuss its possibilities.

4. Application of Gendlin's new phenomenology: rehabilitation medicine

I see the potential of Gendlin's theory of metaphor, his new phenomenology, in its application to rehabilitation medicine. I am currently working on a research project with physical therapists, speech-language pathologists, and clinical psychologists. I would like to introduce it.

First, I will give you an overview of neurocognitive rehabilitation proposed by the Italian neurologist Dr. Carlo Perfetti. We can find many rehabilitation methods with similar names. For example, cognitive rehabilitation, neurorehabilitation, cognitive-neurorehabilitation, and so on. Some of them have a common approach and methodology, while others are based on different ideas. Here I will focus only on the method advocated by Perfetti.

4.1 neurocognitive rehabilitation

When cerebrovascular diseases occur, motor paralysis, aphasia, and higher

brain dysfunction occur depending on the damaged area. Patients are encouraged to recover their functions through rehabilitation. In Japanese rehabilitation medicine, “exercise therapy,” such as joint range-of-motion training and muscle-strengthening training, is the mainstream. While some patients recover well with exercise therapy, others receive no benefit from it.

Unless the rehabilitation therapy induces biological changes (neuronal plasticity) in the brain, the recovery of motor paralysis will not occur. In other words, the target is not the motor paralysis of the visible body, but the invisible “body in the brain.” (Miyamoto 2008: 15)

Perfetti’s neurocognitive rehabilitation advocated the need to focus not on the physical body, but on the body as an image in the brain.

Many hemiplegics, with or without higher brain dysfunction, are unable to have the body images or motor images of self. For example, patients are unable to imagine themselves standing up and running. It has been thought that because they are unable to move their bodies, they are also unable to imagine actions and movements.

According to Perfetti, however, it is the opposite. The patients are unable to imagine the body movement or action, and therefore are unable to move their body. Under these conditions, no matter how much physical exercise training is practiced, it will not induce an effective therapeutic result. Thus, it is of utmost importance to restore the patient’s own body awareness and body image. Simply put, the goal of neurocognitive rehabilitation is to help patients reacquire a “sense of agency” and a “sense of ownership” over their bodies through imagery training.

However, even if we talk about implementing imagery training to restore

the patient's body awareness and body image, it is nevertheless still a very difficult task. This is because we find the complexity of self-organization in the brain and the diversity of paralysis.

Self-organization occurs constantly in the damaged brain. New neural pathways are formed. Therefore, it is impossible to predict and determine exactly whether rehabilitation has resulted in improvement or not. Moreover, the results of self-organization are not necessarily advantageous or effective for the patient's future life. So, therapy must be hand-tailored to the patient's situation and requires constant feedback and correction. Furthermore, the symptoms of paralysis are very different from one patient to another. The therapy must be individually explored based on the patient's reality. For this reason, neurocognitive rehabilitation relies on the patient's own words.

In neurocognitive rehabilitation, we have always emphasized "language".....we have believed that it is important to explore the patient's experience. It is clear, then, that careful analysis of the language in which patients describe their bodies, pathologies, training, and interactions with reality is important (Perfetti 2012: 34).

The distinctive feature of Perfetti's method is the use of experiential language, the patient's first-person narrative, as well as physiological mechanisms (the patient's muscles, bones, etc.) and objectively assessed cognition, to formulate the therapy task.

4.2 Reorganization of the body through metaphor

In order to reorganize the patient's own body image and body awareness, neurocognitive rehabilitation relies on the patient's narrative of experience. It

is the metaphor that plays an important role in this narrative.

Patients cannot give objective descriptions because they are being asked to talk about their own experiences with shoulder exercises. If they gave subjective descriptions, they would not be understood by anyone. So we have to use what Lakoff and Johnson call the “language of experience,” a language of description. And in the language of experience, metaphor as a means of communication has an important place (Perfetti 2012: 39).

Metaphors are essential. The body, which before the disease was so self-evident that it functioned in a state of transparency, so to speak, without special awareness, has been thoroughly transformed by the disease and has become an “object” that confounds the patient. It is difficult to describe this sensation in literal terms, and the patient is trying to express it somehow through metaphors. As in the quote above, a “language of experience” is needed.

The patient talks to the therapist about her or his physical situation, sensation, and feelings, and the therapist listens and devises a therapy task that is oriented to the patient’s physical feelings, and together they practice it. In these situations, metaphors enable mutual understanding between the patient and therapist.

However, the effectiveness of metaphor in neurocognitive rehabilitation may be due to the non-parallel functional relationships in Gendlin. As Perfetti emphasizes, the importance of metaphor is its ability to transform the body and its experience within the patient’s situation and reality. In other words, metaphors bring new insights and new feelings to the patient. This is the effect

of phenomenological description using reflexivity.

Metaphor and experience influence each other. That is, just as experience changes metaphor, so metaphor alters experience. Similarly, the relationship with the organization of the central nervous system (CNS) is also bidirectional. Just as metaphor and experience change the organization of the CNS, so too metaphor and experience are transformed by the organization of the CNS (Perfetti 2012: 43).

Neurocognitive rehabilitation aims to induce brain plasticity through imagery training to regain the lost physical and cognitive functions. Recent neuroscience research has revealed that imagery training induces organic changes in the brain and reorganizes neural systems. Based on such findings, if “language” is effective in bringing about new awareness and new understanding of the patient’s own bodily sensations and re-creating the sense of ownership and the sense of agency, both patients and therapists should actively use language of experience.

Let me give you a concrete example.

A patient suffering from paralysis after a car accident (who later competed in the Paralympics and became a gold medalist) points out the importance of verbalizing and becoming aware of one’s own physical feelings in rehabilitation. For example, the patient was not able to “grab a handkerchief and lift it up.” But when she focused on her physical sensations and imagined “lifting the center point of the back of her hand upward,” her fingers moved naturally and she was able to grasp the handkerchief, she said¹⁾.

These two actions, “grabbing something and lifting it up” and “lifting the back of the hand,” are perceived as almost the same by objective external

observation. However, depending on how the patient imagines and verbalizes her or his bodily sensations, the way the body feels changes.

In my research project, physical therapists and speech-language pathologists are studying the improvement of rehabilitation effectiveness by encouraging patients to try different descriptions of their experience.

Finally, I would like to briefly discuss how these functions of metaphor can be considered in neuroscience. Rehabilitation research has been progressing rapidly in recent years, using BMI, a technology that directly reads electrical signals in the brain and connects them to some devices, to induce brain plasticity²⁾. The effects of rehabilitation are achieved, in short, by inducing brain plasticity. For example, a paralyzed patient intends to “move his hands,” but is unable to do so. In BMI-based rehabilitation, a headphone-type device reads brain signals and transmits them to a device attached to the arm, which moves the hand externally and physically. Of course, we cannot intentionally generate brain signals on our own. But through interaction with various metaphors and imagining various bodily sensations, we move the muscles connected by the BMI when the “correct” signal in question is generated by chance. This repetition strengthens the brain’s function and creates plasticity. One might hypothesize that this is what Perfetti meant in his earlier quote, “Just as metaphor and experience change the organization of the CNS, so too metaphor and experience are changed by the organization of the central nervous system.”

Phenomenology, which can carry the descriptions of experience forward, has potential applications in rehabilitation medicine.

5. Conclusion

I would like to summarize the entirety of discussion.

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Gendlin argued that the interaction of felt sense and symbols creates new insights and new meanings about the experience. He pointed out that the creativity of phenomenological descriptions had already been used unconsciously by Husserl and other phenomenologists, and Gendlin proposed to use it as a method. I am exploring its applicability to rehabilitation medicine. When a patient suffering from paralysis feels her or his own body and symbolizes it with metaphors, the relationship between her or his own body and the world can be reorganized, and it may also trigger plasticity in terms of brain science.

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Notes

- 1) For more information on this case, see Mimura 2021, *Landing With/On the Foot: "Imaging Landing Sites"* in Arakawa and Gins.
- 2) See Asa Ito 2022, "*karadaha yuku. Dekiruwo kagakusuru*" in Japanese, "Body goes. The Science of Being Able to Do," Chapter 4.

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