

## Frequently overlooked principles of Experiencing and how they can enhance your practice

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### *Theoretical Models We Rely on and Frequently Neglect*

We most often introduce Focusing citing studies done with the Experiencing Scale, that successful clients in psychotherapy tended to attend to their experience in a particular way, and what these successful clients were doing was essentially Focusing. Most of us rely on this theoretical model, the manner of experiencing, as a base for introducing Focusing. But what is often neglected in this model is Gendlin's unique contribution to these research studies. Gendlin is a philosopher, and at around this time, he was working on his doctoral theses on the relationship between experience and symbols---his philosophy of experiencing. And how did Gendlin understand 'experiencing'? That is the frequently neglected but important aspect which relates to our practice. Let us take a closer look at 'experiencing' and re-examine our Focusing practice.

### *Experiencing, Re-experiencing and Crossing*

Gendlin (1997) writes that the philosopher W.Dilthey has had a "radical impact" on this philosophy. Dilthey's hermeneutic circle of "experience-expression-understanding" can be thought of as the origin of Gendlin's term "experiencing". When a focuser says that there is a nervous twist in his abdomen, that is the experience, and a "nervous twist" is the expression, and the focuser's understands himself/herself to being in a "nervous twist". But when one attends to this "nervous twist" it may feel as if something is "coming out" from under the nervousness, in which case, the circle turns where "something is coming out" is the further experience and the expression is "something is coming out", and one's self-understanding is that "something is coming out". In Gendlin's theory we don't have "an experience" of nervousness. It is an experience-ing, where that which is expressed/understood as "nervousness" continues to evolve in a process. Focusing Short Form (the six movements) facilitates this process. In it, we notice that the movement sequence "felt sense-handle-asking" corresponds to Dilthey's "experience-expression-understanding".

Another term used by Dilthey is *nacherleben*, which is roughly translated into English as "re-experiencing". The listener re-experiences the focuser as the focuser is reflecting (re-experiencing) their situation. Re-experiencing is pre-reflexive, in that the listener does not need to make a special effort to re-experience the focuser. For example, when we are watching a movie, we are not making a special effort to "have empathy" for the main character. The main character's experience has also become our experience (re-experiencing) when we realize it. The main character and we have crossed. Similarly, the Focuser and the Listener cross into each other into an inter-subjective reality. Therefore, expressions (handle expressions) from the listener's re-experiencing can carry forward the Focuser's experiencing and vice versa. Also, the Focuser's experience can be crossed with a different listener in a different way (into a different inter-subjective reality). So different meanings can emerge when we Focus with different listeners. Very often, the person finds different new meaning arising in their experiencing, when they talk about the same issue with different people. This is understandably so because different inter-subjective realities are created when the person talks about the same issue with different persons---when crossed with a different person's re-experiencing.

Gendlin seems to use the term “crossing” in at least two different ways. One way, as discussed above is where crossing means re-experiencing, as Gendlin (1997, p.41) writes “these cross so that each become implicit in the other”. Another way with which Gendlin uses ‘crossing’ is within his (linguistic) metaphor theory. In the appendix to *Let Your Body Interpret Your Dreams* (1986, p.150), Gendlin raises a question: “how is my anger like a chair”. Here, anger is “crossed with” a chair. All about a chair can be read into anger, eliciting a cognitive process where one newly creates the similarity between the two. In Gendlin’s metaphor theory, the similarity is newly created and does not pre-exist the metaphor.

### *The “Carried Forward Was”*

Crossing carries forward. New meanings are created. Interestingly the new meaning is new, and yet it feels as though it were there all the time. “I was angry all this time, I must have suppressed it”, a Focuser might say. But this anger was not there a few minutes before the carrying forward. Gendlin has called this “was” a “retroactive was”, or “to read backwards”, and I do recall him using the phrase “the carried forward was”. Psychological contents as “self” or “the unconscious” or even “the implicit” do not pre-exist the crossing. How the anger is like a chair, does not exist beforehand. Thus, one always finds that such and such was implicit, it was suppressed in the unconscious, or that such and such was the real self. But these are novel entities that were just created in the crossing!

Psychotherapy theories lack a theory of creativity. From Freud and psychoanalysis, every symbol in consciousness was an inaccurate representation of some earlier memory. Human experience was a product of past events, hence the creation of new meaning was seen as impossible. There was only regression and no creativity. (Creativity was a “regression in the service of the ego”.)

Theoretical concepts in psychotherapy such as the above will be discussed in light of Gendlin’s theory of experiencing. Particular attention will be paid to the term “empathy” (Carl Rogers), since Roger’s reformulation of this concept in 1975 as “to help the person focus” is often neglected in the psychotherapy literature.

### *Our Focusing Practice*

How will our practice be affected with these theoretical re-examinations? A Focusing demonstration session as well as our Focusing practice in pairs will hopefully serve as a ground upon which we can ‘see’ these concepts in action.

### **Biographical Information**

Professor Akira Ikemi, Ph.D., Kansai University Graduate School of Psychology. A former student of Gendlin at the University of Chicago, a former board member of TFI and former president of the Japan Focusing Association. Currently serving as ILC. Practices at a medical institution and trains privately.