

Abstract

The experience of a relationship in which one is truly heard and understood is both rare and healing. It is what humanistic psychotherapy, with its emphasis on the reparative therapeutic bond, offers at its best, yet research into clients' phenomenology of empathy or attunement is so rare that there have been only three previous studies, all by the same author.

This study aims to present clients' attunement phenomenologies in their own terms, not filtered out of existence by preconceived categories of experience for statistical analysis, nor interpreted for them by therapists or observers, as with almost all previous research. The unity of purpose and subject was achieved using interpretative phenomenological analysis, a method in which the researcher attuned to participants to comprehend their attunement experiences. Five semi-structured interviews were conducted, with assumptions about content or outcome bracketed, and notions of measurable objectivity cast aside as irrelevant to lived experience. Immersed over several months in recordings and transcripts, the researcher analysed them one by one for units of meaning, corroborated by participants and an uninvolved psychotherapy colleague, then combined and analysed.

The result: attunement is para-parental nurturing, creating for the client an attachment with the therapist and increased self-attunement; and the client's role in the attuned dyad is critical, requiring further research.