

Countertransference in a Phenomenological Perspective: The Role of the Therapist's Embodiment

This project explores a vital yet often overlooked aspect of psychotherapy: how therapists tune into their own bodily sensations to better understand and support their patients. While therapy is often described as a “talking cure,” much of what happens in the therapeutic space is non-verbal and deeply felt. Subtle physical responses can offer important clues about what is unfolding in the relationship between therapist and patient. This phenomenon—known as countertransference—refers to the emotional and bodily reactions therapists experience in response to their patients. Although countertransference has been discussed in psychoanalysis for decades, it is still rarely examined from the perspective of the therapist’s lived, bodily experience.

This project seeks to fill that research gap using phenomenology—a philosophical approach that explores experience from a first-person point of view. Rather than starting with theory or diagnosis, phenomenology begins with the question: What is it like to live through a certain experience? In this case: How do therapists notice their bodily reactions? How do they make sense of them in the moment? And how might these experiences shift when therapy takes place online, without physical co-presence?

To explore these questions, the project combines philosophical reflection with qualitative research. It includes interviews with experienced therapists from different theoretical backgrounds. Using a method inspired by micro-phenomenology—which focuses on the subtle, often pre-verbal aspects of lived experience—the study investigates how therapists sense, interpret, and respond to their own bodily signals in clinical situations. These bodily responses may influence how therapists listen, make decisions, and attune emotionally to their patients.

The motivation for this research comes from needs in clinical practice. Therapists are usually trained to understand emotions and recognize verbal or behavioral cues. But they are not always taught to notice—or trust—what their own bodies might be telling them. Ignoring these signals can lead to missed clinical insights, misunderstandings in the therapeutic relationship, or serious breaches of professional boundaries.

By highlighting the bodily side of therapeutic work, this project aims to enrich how psychotherapy is understood, taught, and practiced. It also responds to a deeper theoretical issue: psychotherapy is still often described in ways that separate mind from body. Yet in the lived experience of both patient and therapist, such a split rarely holds. Drawing on thinkers like Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the project shows that the therapist’s body is not just present in the room—it is a source of knowledge, empathy, and connection. Attuning through the body is not only possible but essential for good, ethical, and attuned psychotherapy.