

INSIDE OUT:
Focusing as a Therapeutic Modality
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Focusing (Gendlin, 1981) turns therapy inside out—questioning the intent of therapy, the authority and purpose of the therapist, and the perception of “problems” themselves. Focusing is based on the *experience* of a person—and thus depathologizes conflict. Instead, it defines pathology as blocked process and thus offers a powerful method for accessing inner experiences of conflict and facilitating their movement toward change. As a therapeutic modality, Focusing helps to develop and make deliberate an underused potential. It enhances what all people do naturally—although mostly unconsciously or with varying degrees of awareness—that is, turn attention inside with the intent to understand and express what initially boggles or disturbs them. Through this practice, individuals can gain a sense of relief, along with internal sources of information that open up pathways toward tangible change and beneficial outcomes.

Focusing is a psychotherapeutic approach originated by Eugene Gendlin and his colleagues from the University of Chicago in the 1960s and 1970s. Focusing has since grown from a self-help technique to an established training program, offering individuals and therapists a broad-spectrum method to deepen experience and facilitate somatic shifts that enable emotional, cognitive, and behavioral changes. This article explores the development and rationale of Gendlin’s (1959, 1961, 1962, 1964, 1967, 1968, 1981, 1989, 1996, 2004) Focusing.

This article also takes the reader through detailed steps of application, providing an experiential explanation of the methodology.

BACKGROUND AND DEVELOPMENT

When a client changes, what is it that is really happening? Regardless of paradigm, technique, or therapeutic style, Gendlin found that the fundamental process of change lies *within* the client. Focusing-oriented experiential therapy grew out of Gendlin's collaboration with Carl Rogers, the founder of client-centered psychotherapy, and is historically rooted in the traditions of humanistic and experiential psychology (Bohart, 2003; Rogers, 1957, 1961). In the 1950s, Rogers identified unconditional positive regard, empathy, and congruence as therapeutic attitudes central to the process of change. Gendlin deepened and elaborated the approach of person-centered therapy by studying and measuring the qualities of client involvement indicative of movement and change.

Gendlin (1981, 1989) found that clients with successful therapeutic experiences show an increasing ability to refer to bodily felt experience, which could be detected early in the counseling process and which predicted outcome. Those clients without this ability did not necessarily learn on their own and had poorer outcome. Gendlin also found that not only is each person's experience unique but that the way of getting to that experience is just as important as what is found. He became interested in the intricacy of internal processes, discovering that people's experiences require "more specificity and precision than logic permits" (Gendlin, 1989, p. 406). In other words, Gendlin amplified what it means to be client centered. He proposed that therapeutic effectiveness improves with an increase in the ability to interact with "demandingly precise feedback" (Gendlin, 1989, p. 410)—a keen awareness of

what is occurring in the moment. Hendricks (2001), director of the Focusing Institute, explained “the small steps of change that emerge directly from the client’s felt sense of a problem are more creative and exact than we [as therapists] can generate” (p. 20). Progress occurs not because it is linear and logical but because of the intelligent and responsive navigation of one’s unique experiential map.

To give a practical example of how Focusing (Gendlin, 1981) occurs in an everyday way, imagine you have that funny feeling that you have forgotten something, a kind of inner discomfort or conflictual feeling inside yourself that just won’t go away. You scrunch up your face, bring your hand to your head, searching around inside of yourself. Not this, not that . . . and then, suddenly, “oh yes, it’s *that!*” Ah ha—you and that feeling have made contact. You are left with a sense of resolution for now understanding (i.e., being able to communicate) something that had been disturbing and unknown before.

Focusing is an elaboration on this very process and the many forms that the process takes.

Focusing assists clients in approaching conflict (whether defined as individual, relationship, social, health, and so on) with an attitude of curiosity and openness, entering into the unknown and allowing vague sensations and emotions to take form and express themselves verbally—in a way that gives a person a felt sense of meaning, promotes health, and enhances well-being.

Out of the clients’ experiences emerge body confirmation, unique understandings of their own stories, and movements of change.

VIEW OF HUMAN NATURE

Focusing is founded on an optimistic, process-oriented, phenomenological, and body-based view of human nature. It is oriented toward a positive expectation of change, in that

the “problems” inside you are only those parts of the process that have been stopped, and the aim of focusing is to unstop them and get the process moving again. When you are focusing correctly, you not only expect change; you create it in the very act of focusing. (Gendlin, 1981, p. 67)

Gendlin developed a “Philosophy of the Implicit,” which initiated a “fundamental shift from looking at *content* [italics added]—what the client discusses—to the manner of *process* [italics added]—how the client is relating to the experience” (Hendricks, 2001, p. 3). Gendlin attributed this deeper level of experiencing to sustainable and measurable changes in clients. He and his colleague Zimring examined hundreds of transcripts and taped psychotherapy interviews from which they formulated the experience level variable and developed two measurement instruments, the Process Scale and the Experiencing Scale (Hendricks, 2001; see Appendix).

Because of its phenomenological orientation, Focusing uses the body to access information, that is, “the total brain-mind environment as we sense it” (Gendlin, 1981, p. ix). These vague senses of the body hold meaning. According to Gendlin, rational understanding alone is not an effective method for sustainable client change. The body’s reactions—the ability to localize a problem through meaningful bodily sensation and the consequent shift in physical sensations—signal identifiable changes of experience. Gendlin wove cognitive, emotional, and behavioral elements together, recognizing their common thread through the body. By entering human experience with a friendly attitude of curiosity rather than therapeutic expertise, the authority is transferred to the client. As Santen (1988) explained, “one’s mind functions as the therapist while the body is the client. . . . The changes in the experiencing thus initiated [by receiving the body’s ‘answers’] affect the client’s behavior and the way the client experiences him or herself and the environment” (p. 447).

Gendlin measured development according to an individual’s “experiencing” level (see Appendix). Focusing is self-enhancing, in that “the more direct inner referents become felt data of attention, the more the person is able to focus and be in touch with the experiential process,

the more congruent awareness and experience become, and the healthier a person feels” (Hauser, 2001, pp. 97–98). This deepened connection with one’s experience directly informs feelings, thoughts, and actions. Thus, the practice of Focusing extends to daily life, affecting personal problems, relationships, and interactions with the world at large.

THE THERAPEUTIC PROCESS

The main goal of Focusing is to facilitate the process of experiencing, the deepening ability to refer inwardly and live from there (see Appendix). Gendlin (1981) explained that “it often isn’t possible to deal fully with a given problem in one focusing session” (p. 63). The process has its own timing. The stopping places are just as important as the discovery and movement, in that one needs time to let the “body live with this much changed [*sic*], and perhaps also to go out into the world and see what happens. Steps of focusing and steps of outward action often alternate. Each aids the other” (Gendlin, 1981, p. 63). In this way, Focusing recognizes a fundamental interconnection between inner and outer transformation.

Focusing can be practiced alone, with the assistance of a friend or therapist, or as a group. In all settings, a friendly atmosphere free of critical voices is crucial to help sustain an open, curious, encouraging attitude (Gendlin, 1981). This atmosphere also speaks to a therapist’s willingness to drop an authoritative role and give the expertise to the client’s own ability to follow her or his inner experience. Too often as therapists, we tend to rely on our own interpretations and eagerness to provide knowledge. Questions and solutions often arise out of our own fears, assumptions, and inability to sustain the tension of exploring the unknown (Hendricks, 2001). The therapist’s role is more that of a witness–facilitator, “helping the client

hear the messages that the inner self is sending, finding the right symbolizations in which the bodily experience can move further into meaning” (Leijssen, 1998, p. 131).

Signs of change are both inwardly felt and outwardly recognizable. Gendlin (1981)

highlighted this critical indicator of body-based change:

You feel better mainly because your body feels better, more free, released. The whole body is alive in a less constricted way. You have localized a problem that had previously made your whole body feel bad. An immediate freeing feeling lets you know there is a body shift. It is the body having moved toward a solution. (pp. 25–26)

When people change, they also show physical signs of these inner shifts, such as momentary relaxation and easing of the body, better circulation, and deeper breathing. Gendlin’s (1981) accounts of his work with people over a longer period of time described startling changes in their entire bodies, faces, and carriage. These inner and outward signs of change reflect the holistic nature and congruence of Focusing as a psychotherapeutic practice.

SIX STEPS IN THE APPLICATION OF FOCUSING

Gendlin delineated six movements of change in order to break down, describe, and teach the method of Focusing. He offered these steps as a practice in mindfulness to facilitate movement in those places where individuals become stuck, to enhance awareness, and to potentially open up pathways for change. In this section, I elaborate on the felt sense and the felt shift as key elements of the six movements of change.

Before even beginning, Gendlin suggested preparing oneself to focus by finding a time and place to quietly sit for a while. It should be somewhere outside of the familiar routine and distractions. He suggested that a person should help his or her body get comfortable: “if you’re cold, put on a sweater. . . if your foot itches, take off your shoe and scratch it” (Gendlin, 1981, p. 52). Tending to these small physical irritations will help the body’s information come through

more clearly. In the following paragraphs, I demonstrate the steps by writing my own process verbatim, both to illustrate the pacing and strange logic that Focusing often entails and to engage you, the reader, in a more experiential understanding of the Focusing method.

Step 1: Clearing a Space

The first step is “clearing a space” (Gendlin, 1981). Gendlin suggested asking oneself, How am I doing right now? What is between me and feeling fine? Instead of answering right away, at first just listen. Listen to what comes from your body. This is a process of letting out all that is going on inside, without delving into the details. Let each thing come—the huge issues that perpetually haunt you, the trivial annoyances of the day—and set each problem aside. You do not have to try to list everything that disturbs you; just those things that make you feel tense in the moment. Like sifting through sand to clear out all the rocks, check in to see what is there and then set each one aside. Once you have your pile, notice how you feel—until you can say, “OK, except for all that, I’m fine.”

As I sit here in the moment, what keeps me from feeling fine? Well, there’s the task at hand—writing this manuscript, finding the words and organizing my thinking, to be clear and simple, yet also thorough enough, so that it is comprehensive and understood. Ahh, just by finding those words to express myself I feel a sense of relief. So the process of Focusing is happening in the moment, at each turn of needing to express something. Just list, Katje—don’t go into the details yet. What else? Sense of pressure to get it out and finish. Oh, and there are the citations. And wanting feedback from my colleague. And then there’s that other upcoming writing project. A sense of frustration with myself for not being able to express myself more efficiently and effectively, not using my time well. More? Go ahead, go for it. I find myself wanting to censor, for privacy sake, for not wanting to reveal too much, for not wanting to expose how much goes on in there, busy with thoughts and emotions. Yeah, what thoughts and emotions are you busy with? What else is keeping you from feeling fine? Check in—what’s the tension in your body right now? My relationship with my friend. My roommate coming back from the coast. My friend’s daughter in crisis potentially coming to stay. Oh, and that project again. Again, a feeling that I’m wasting time haunted by it all. Ahh . . . and then a clearing—in the moment, other than that, I guess I’m . . . No, there’s more—this feeling of really wanting to get it, do it right, full satisfaction, not just getting through it. Then that

looming feeling . . . will I ever again feel deeply emotionally connected, intimate with someone—and that someone wanting to be close and intimate with me. Then a little around food lately—knowing I’m eating a lot out of my nervousness and agitation for all that I have to do, my edges to doing it. And then there’s the wanting a vacation, and perpetual nervousness around money. Wondering if I’ll ever feel free-er in me around creativity and organizing that into something useful for others—the teacher in me, who really wants to offer something and be effective, make a contribution. With each thing, I notice my breath comes, and I feel lighter—just for giving it words, getting it OUT. And as I am doing this, I get excited for a new thought—the idea that I should make this manuscript more experiential, not so formal in the voice, citations, and so on. More of a self-reflective demonstration of the theory itself. OK, other than all this, I’m doing quite well!

Step 2: Felt Sense of the Problem

The next step is listening inside to access the felt sense. A felt sense arises out of the vague and fuzzy feelings that people sense through the body. It is “holistic in nature and contains within it much more than we can easily think or emotionally know about our situation” (Focusing Institute, 2003, para. 6). Once you have your pile (or huge mound!), choose the problem that feels the worst in the moment or the problem that seems to demand attention. Again, see what arises in your body: that one! For me, in this moment, what comes is the pressure of writing itself. Instead of going into the problem as one normally would—diving into all the details, generating a list of understandings, becoming mad or hopeless, or trying to solve it, Gendlin advised to stand back from it and sense how it makes one feel in the body. Ask “What does this whole problem feel like?” Now, do not answer in words— instead just sense the whole thing, the feeling of “all that.”

Gendlin (1981) emphasized the importance of having a detached, friendly attitude, that is, that a person “accept every feeling that comes, not argue with it, not challenge it with peremptory demands that it explain itself” (p. 29). He also specified that the felt sense is not just about getting in touch with emotions but about letting a larger, wider, unclear feeling form.

This requires that a person hold a kind of paradoxical tension or “dual awareness,” allowing him or her to be both fuzzy and curious at the same time, feeling and thinking (Mindell, 2000). Most striking is the experience of what might be called passive attention—allowing some part of yourself to simply relax and let the “goings-on” happen while another part studies that process—not judging or interpreting, but interested and attentive, like a scientist taking notes on her or his data or a photographer capturing the changes of the season. This odd combination of relaxed experiencing alongside active attending is essential to the process of Focusing and is similar to the commonly recognized communication skill of “active listening,” yet turned toward yourself.

As I turn my attention inward on this whole thing of “writing,” I notice it is difficult to find the felt sense at first. I notice images, situations . . . and then this general overall feeling comes in, a little ephemeral, like I can’t quite grasp it. Then it returns again. My mind quickly wants to go into it—it feels chaotic in there. I pick up Gendlin’s (1981) book and read “Shut up for a change, and listen and feel . . . be patient. . . . Somehow you must get down past all that noise to the felt sense underneath” (p. 53). Hmmm . . . writing . . . all that about writing . . . OK, it’s around. I am feeling something.

Step 3: Finding a Handle

Gendlin called the third movement of change “getting a handle.” People commonly use this expression to describe being close to understanding: an overview that gives them something to grab onto and take them further. This step involves allowing a quality, word, and/or image to emerge out of the felt sense. (These steps often move into each other quite rapidly, fluidly, and unconsciously when they are happening naturally. Breaking them down and disentangling them from each other can be helpful when you are feeling stuck.) Gendlin (1981) explained that “you want the crux of *all that*, the special quality that comes up from it” (p. 55). Again, it is not about putting words onto the felt sense but about allowing them to come. You

may find that the feeling you had before changes slightly as you discover its quality more specifically. Gendlin regarded this as an important sign of differentiation, of getting closer to what exactly “all that” is. He used the analogy of children playing hide-and-seek, in that the felt sense itself is guiding one’s search by saying “cold, colder” as one moves in the wrong direction or “warm, warmer” as one moves in the right direction, until “HOT!” and one finds it and feels that the word, image, or phrase fits the feeling just right.

Often at this stage, you may find that nothing comes—you hit a “big blank.” Gendlin (1981) explained that

because such an empty space is frightening, people who find one inside themselves often run back into work and other time-filling activities that they don’t enjoy. . . . They may drive themselves so hard to avoid the blank that they make themselves physically ill. (p. 30; see also Hauser, 2001, Mindell, 2000, and Mindell and Mindell, 2002, for an elaboration on edges, somatization, and addiction processes)

It is a painful experience to suffer alone at these stuck places, scared or not knowing how to further explore unknown experiences. Gendlin’s (1981) entire attitude and formulation of Focusing “allows you to approach any such blank with equanimity, like anything else. For a blank is also a feeling. Instead of backing away from it in fear, you walk right up to it, and find out what is there” (p. 30). This may require the help of a friend or therapist and also depends on that person’s ability to meet his or her own emptiness and hold the tension of not-having-to-know, curiously exploring, rather than rushing in with suggestions or analysis.

It is challenging to write and tune in at the same time. OK, this disturbing feeling about writing . . . I get this image of edging away, kind of wincing, though not quite. Hmmm . . . what’s that feeling? . . . Scared, no not quite. (So much of this process is nonverbal and internal, I will simultaneously attempt to describe what’s happening.) Cowering . . . panicked . . . frozen . . . caught . . . freaked out. (The words come, trying to match the feeling.) Do I have to? Now I’m laughing. With this last phrase—do I have to?—something shifts inside of me. That’s it and for some reason, it really strikes me as funny. This reaction is unexpected and somehow makes me feel like I’m all the more on

the right track—tuning into something new, not just preconceptions or intellectual understandings (that might very well be accurate but not so helpful to the felt change that focusing addresses).

Step 4: Resonating Handle and Felt Sense

Gendlin called the fourth movement “resonating,” a process of refining the relationship between felt sense and verbal description. Ask again, Is this right? Allow the body to answer. Gendlin explained that it is the body’s response that indicates the accuracy of the match. The feeling of internal agreement is what Gendlin (1981) called the felt shift—a connection or transfer of knowledge between levels of awareness, which manifests as a tangible shift in body experience—a feeling of relief, release, or resolution. Gendlin emphasized this step of feeling the felt shift as the heart of the process of Focusing. The felt shift itself leads to changes and implies next steps of living.

Resonating requires that you experience the felt sense again: “you must touch it again as a feeling . . . not necessarily the same feeling as it was, but the felt sense as it is now (perhaps a little changed)” (Gendlin, 1981, p. 57). Recall the feeling, check it against the words—back and forth, back and forth. Resonating is not about finding the right answer, as if you are seeking one static thing; rather, it is a process of inner relating that furthers both understanding and movement. Gendlin also noted that taking the time to resonate is itself important, in that the body is changing and needs time for the somatic processing and corresponding systemic shifts to occur.

As I go into the feeling again, I noticed it has changed slightly. It’s more of a feeling of being smushed, contorted, all hemmed in. . . . I see myself backed up into a corner, up against a wall. Yes, but not quite right. I return to the feeling, get the image of me sitting at the computer . . . struggle. Yes, that’s it! A slow subtle release moves through me. I go back and forth, back and forth. For some reason that seemingly simple word *struggle*—feels so right, embodies the experience so well. (I am interrupted by a phone call and

realize how much it takes to return to the felt sense, like I have literally been pulled out and away from this experience. It takes awhile for me to find it again. No wonder we are so plagued by disturbances, when constant distractions—both internally and from outside—take us away from actually going into and exploring these experiences, and the consequent potential of relief.) As I sit here and resonate between the feeling and the word, my body subtly melts inside. My whole experience seems to be changing, somehow happy and relieved just to be facing it, not running from the experience itself. Instead, hanging out with the sensation.

Step 5: Asking

This step of asking involves getting to know what the felt sense is. Gendlin suggested asking, What is it about this whole thing that is such a *struggle*? Using the handle, you once again access the felt sense. Your conscious thinking process may quickly give answers, rushing in and crowding the ability to feel and listen inside. Gendlin (1981) explained that

it is partly a matter of knowing what to pay attention to, what to ignore. It is a matter of knowing how to set your mind so that it will be receptive to certain things happening inside but not to others. (p. 54)

Like a good friend, you are interested in what the felt sense has to say. Ask open-ended questions and then wait—listen for what comes. The answers, the felt shift, the feeling of “oh yes, that’s what it’s about”—these come in their own timing. The time spent focusing, sensing something still unclear, is just as important as the answer itself. Gendlin (1981) encouraged people to keep sensing, asking, listening until something stirs. Two other questions may be helpful: “What is the worst of this?” and “What does the felt sense need?” (Gendlin, 1981, p. 60). The key is refraining from answering, instead listening for what arises from the felt sense.

As I return to this felt sense around writing, I find again this feeling of struggle. Yet this time, it has a slightly different quality. As I explore that, I notice that everything starts to feel very scrunched inside. Not exactly that . . . closed in. Yes, that is the experience. I feel very closed in. I notice the sense of agreement in my body as these words come. And then I ask, “What is this feeling of being closed in? What is so bad about being closed in?” And right away my body responds: I want to get out, something wants to come out. This is surprising— normally I just recognize the discomfort, the pressure, and

anxiety around writing. But this changes my experience. I realize that something in there wants to express itself, has something to say. I feel a little stirring of something . . . of freedom, of excitement, of new possibility. And when I ask, “What does this need?” I hear curiosity, interest, encouragement to come out. I see someone making a beckoning motion with their hands, like encouraging a turtle out of its shell, a little shy something to come out and play.

So if I go one step further and ask what this new thing wants to express . . . I want to say, this practice is so meaningful to me. I have a lot of faith in the foundational premises of Gendlin’s work and research. I feel he has concretized something and formulated it into a teachable practice that offers something of incredible value. I think this practice puts into language a subtle and powerful realm of experience that is extremely difficult to name, but absolutely real and crucial to change—internal, interpersonal, and social. When we are moved by something someone says, I think it comes from this ability to express from deep inner experiences. I think of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his speech that has had an impact on so many people and changed history. I think of the times when I have gone through personal struggles, and people have believed in me and what I was experiencing, and through their love I was able to stay with myself and trust my experience. I know the healing I have experienced through that process of letting my insides guide me and the power I have felt when I express myself from that place. I have a wish, I have my own dream, that others believe in what is going on in them, that we all create a world that fosters this ability to listen within and offer ourselves to life, and I strive to contribute to this process.

Step 6: Receiving

This last step is about welcoming whatever has come, whether or not you believe in it, agree with it, or want to do anything with it. It is an attitude of receiving that involves detachment and choice, as well as a doorway to a guiding relationship within. It is important to “shelter what has come from [that] deep source,” (Santen, 1999, p. 9) to protect the shift from criticism, and (like other forms of bodywork) give yourself time to change and integrate new information. Gendlin emphasized that each round of Focusing is part of a larger process, that with each felt shift comes another change of experience that leads a person perpetually onward, with growing awareness that is itself healing and enriching.

I feel encouraged by this experience, an actual sense of excitement and anticipation for what’s to come through my writing experiences. Just being with what was amorphous discomfort was incredibly relieving, instead of distracting myself from it or holding my

breath and diving in. It gave me a new sense of power and hopefulness in my relationship to that “beast” of writing. I realize there is something inside that actually wants to come out and discovered a new attitude of curiosity and encouragement to help me express myself.

CONCLUSION

Focusing bridges the subjectivity of experiential psychotherapeutic traditions with the objectivity of scientific realms. The method tests cognitive perceptions with inwardly felt phenomena, engaging simultaneously many aspects of one’s perceptual capacities. Focusing develops both feeling and thinking abilities, inviting both to coexist, for inner worlds and outward expression to channel freely.

Focusing, therefore, contributes to the fields of counseling and holistic health in the following ways. First, the approach identifies inner experience as a key indicator of change, a phenomenon that applies across therapeutic orientations. Second, Focusing presents a method to facilitate somatic shifts and the outer directions they imply. Third, the method substantiates the mind–body connection by demonstrating a measurable influence on health factors. In doing so, Focusing offers an innovative and powerful approach that brings an exciting new dimension of meaning and creativity to our work as counselors and the people we serve.

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APPENDIX

The Experiencing Scale

Stage One: The content is not about the speaker. The speaker tells a story, describes other people or events in which he or she is not involved or presents a generalized or detached account of ideas.

Stage Two: Either the speaker is the central character in the narrative or his or her interest is clear. Comments and reactions serve to get the story across but do not refer to the speaker's feelings.

Stage Three: The content is a narrative about the speaker in external or behavioral terms with added comments on feelings or private experiences. These remarks are limited to the situations described, giving the narrative a personal touch without describing the speaker more generally.

Stage Four: Feelings or the experience of events, rather than the events themselves, are the subject of the discourse. The client tries to attend to and hold onto the direct inner reference of experiencing and make it the basic datum of communications.

Stage Five: The content is a purposeful exploration of the speaker's feelings and experiencing. The speaker must pose or define a problem or proposition about self explicitly in terms of feelings. And must explore or work with the problem in a personal way. The client now can focus on the vague, implicitly meaningful aspects of experiencing and struggle to elaborate it.

Stage Six: The subject matter concerns the speaker's present, emergent experience. A sense of active, immediate involvement in an experientially anchored issue is conveyed with evidence of its resolution or acceptance. The feelings themselves change or shift.

Stage Seven: Experiencing at stage seven is expansive, unfolding. The speaker readily uses a fresh way of knowing the self to expand experiencing further. The experiential perspective is now a trusted and reliable source of self-awareness and is steadily carried forward and employed as the primary referent for thought and action.

Note: From The Experiencing Scale: A Research and Training Manual Volume 1. (p. 56-63), by M. Klein, P. Mathieu, E. Gendlin, and D. Kiesler, 1969, Wisconsin Psychiatric Institute. Copyright 2000, Network for Research on Experiential Psychotherapies. Adapted with permission from author. Please refer to http://www.experiential-researchers.org/instruments/exp_scale/exp_scale_long.html for scale in its entirety.