

A Critical Evaluation of the Theories and Practices in Existential Psychotherapy

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Abstract: *The paper highlights a few issues that have emerged over the years in the understanding and practice of existential psychotherapy. It starts out by tracing the existential and phenomenological traditions of the early 20th century which led to the emergence of existential psychotherapy. Next, it highlights the relationship between existential philosophy and the practice of existential psychotherapy. The article also summarizes problems associated with existential psychotherapy, particularly the difficulties in its empirical testing and defining its theoretical boundaries. It also summarizes popular misconceptions about existential psychotherapy and its connection to other schools of psychotherapy. Finally, the article also talks about issues of religion in practice of existential psychotherapy.*

Keywords: Existentialism, Psychotherapy, Phenomenology, Existential Psychotherapy

1. Introduction

Existentialism is a movement within philosophy that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century in Europe and which became prominent in the post-world war era. The philosophy emphasized the role of the individual in defining one's own existence and tackling the burden of freedom and choice in an irrational world. The broad category of existentialism includes many philosophers from differing backgrounds, who considered the nature of human condition as the core philosophical problem for study (Burnham & Papandreopoulos, 2011). In sum, existentialism is a philosophy of the value and meaning of human existence, and its roots can be traced back to three pioneers, Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) (Panza & Gale, 2008). Kierkegaard wrote on the inherent absurdity of human existence and argued for the need of an irrational yet faithful commitment to the Christian life. Nietzsche's historic *Übermensch* represented individual freedom in inventing one's own values and terms of life (Wrathall & Dreyfus, 2006). These early works inspired a generation of writers and philosophers in the 20th century who recognized themselves as existentialists, most notable of which were Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, etc.

2. History of Existential Psychotherapy

The advent of Edmund Husserl's (1859-1938) phenomenology led to the formulation of a concrete methodology for investigation into human existence and condition. It enabled existentialism to gain momentum and establish grounds within the field of psychology, particularly in psychotherapy. Existential psychotherapy was directly based in philosophy rather than psychology and grew alongside the humanistic school in the third force movement of the 1950-60s (Deurzen, 2010). Existential psychotherapy is not a specific and organized set of techniques or rules of therapy, but rather a set of principles that function as guidelines and meaning structures in defining the practice of therapy (Kim, 2001; Spinelli, 2006). In other words,

existentialist therapists recognize the therapeutic relationship itself as the psychotherapy, which needs to be reinvented by every therapist with each new client (Deurzen, 2010; Oliveira, Sousa & Pires, 2012). Existential psychotherapy is based on the premise that inner conflict within an individual is caused due to the person's confrontation with the ultimate questions of existence: death, freedom, isolation and meaningless (Yalom, 1980; May & Yalom, 1995, Kim, 2001; Zafirides, 2013). The anxiety inherent in facing one of the four concerns is one of the basic issues in existential psychotherapy, alongside taking responsibility for one's own fate and actions. The therapist avoids the role of an expert but instead helps clients to reconstruct their way of being in the world by reflecting upon lived experiences and exploring the meaning of their choices (Oliveira, Sousa & Pires, 2012).

Irvin Yalom (1931-) is considered the most influential and opulent contributor to the field of existential psychotherapy, particularly for his book *Existential Psychotherapy* (1980), which served as guidelines for later existential therapists to follow. Other notable figures in the field were Viktor Frankl (1905-1997), Rollo May (1909-1994), Ludwig Binswanger (1881-1966), Medard Boss (1903-1990), etc all of whom developed their own theories of existential psychotherapy, in relative obscurity of each other (Zafirides, 2013). Although, they believed in similar principles of therapy based on existential philosophy, their ideas were mostly heterogeneous (Keshen, 2006).

3. Main concepts in Existential Psychotherapy

In any case, recognizing oneself with existential psychotherapy requires acknowledging the question of "Which thinker/theorist needs to be considered?". As existential psychotherapists tend to devalue any structured theory of therapy or manualization of techniques, there has been little interest in combining the ideas of various thinkers into a single conceptual framework of existential therapy. Thus, due to its inherent philosophy, existential psychotherapy has remained largely disorganized and discernible (Norcross, 1987; Spinelli, 2006). Even at present, existential psychotherapy exists as a collection of

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themes and remains on the fringes of mainstream psychotherapy with limited recognition. In comparison to other fields within psychology and psychotherapy, the boundaries of existential psychotherapy are loosely defined. Although it is believed that existential therapy emanated from dissatisfaction with an overly reductionist and deterministic psychoanalytic theory of Freud, Norcross (1987) criticizes existential therapy of primarily defining itself against other therapies, often in negative and reactive ways, such that it lacks a concrete definition of its own (Zafirides, 2013). Unlike structured approaches such as cognitive and behavior schools, existential psychotherapy embodies a way of thinking and a set of themes which can be integrated into other therapies (Smith, 2012). However, it doesn't blend well in such pluralistic approach settings, as the mainstream techniques generally emphasize working towards a defined goal during therapy (Cooper, 2014). Thus, the existential stance doesn't fit in too well in an eclectic orientation of therapy unless the existential worldview is held lightly. However, existential principles have been borrowed in the formation of other therapy techniques, particularly in the person centered approach of the humanistic school and gestalt approaches as well (Deurzen, 2010). Existential therapy is also widely recognized as somewhat synonymous to humanistic therapy. Although they share some central themes and principles, they are very different from each other. Humanistic therapy focuses on human potential whereas existential therapy focuses on reality and conditions of existence.

Existential psychotherapy also opposes the disease or illness model characteristic in modern psychopathology. According to existential therapists, diagnosis and treatment is primarily dependent upon patients' subjective and embedded experience such that objective manuals such as DSM are largely irrelevant (Trotter, 2014). They are also mindful of the difference between circumstances for understanding and theories of cause and effect (formulation) such that they remain skeptical of simplistic etiologies of mental disorders prevalent in psychopathology (Owen, 2004). In short, there are no 'cases' in existential psychotherapy; one man's pathology may as well be another man's normalcy (Dean, 2003).

4. Limitations of Existential Psychotherapy

One of the limitations of existential psychotherapy has been its lack of systemic theorizing and empirical evidence of efficacy and effectiveness (Deurzen, 2010). Inherent in its philosophical underpinnings as discussed above, existential therapy is resistant to empirical investigations that tend to dehumanize and objectify human experience by reducing them to numbers or aggregates. Empirical testing is usually based on concepts of reductionism and determinism, which are antithetical to existential/phenomenological understanding of human experience (Norcross, 1967). Moreover, existential therapists themselves have reservations in using experimentation to generate conclusions regarding effectiveness of the therapy process (Lantz, 2004). Conducting empirical research is proportional to creating a manualized model of therapy process, both of which goes

against the basic principles of existential psychotherapy (Keshen, 2006). Furthermore, even for an existentially oriented researcher, there is a dearth of appropriate idiographic or phenomenological research designs, which compounds the lack of empirical support for existential therapy (Norcross, 1987).

Another limitation associated with existential psychotherapy has been its limited scope of applicability in therapy settings. It is often criticized as being overly intellectual such that it works best only with higher functioning individuals capable of self-reflection and evaluation, and with relatively milder problems (Renata). The type of setting is also integral in deciding for an existential approached therapy, as it is only appropriate with clients who are willing to commit to long term therapy and spend many sessions with the therapist (May & Yalom, 1995). It is also more appropriate with clients facing some boundary issues; for example, confronting death, sudden isolation, life cycle milestones, etc. Moreover, existential psychotherapy does not have a noble reputation among the general public with various misconceptions that exist regarding its working. Existential therapy is considered pessimistic, atheistic and too philosophical to begin with. May (1991) defended the pessimistic claim by arguing that certain amount of pain and suffering is required in order to reach happiness and peace, and that the hedonistic principle to life doesn't necessarily always work. In terms of the claim of it being too philosophical, there is no way around it, as the principles of therapy are rooted within the existential philosophy.

The issue of religion within existential psychotherapy remains a sensitive topic of discussion with many criticizing existentialists in general of being atheistic. It is true that a large segment of existentialists advocate an atheistic stance which have been openly expressed in their writings (ex. Nietzsche "*God is dead*", Yalom, Sartre, Camus etc). Atheistic existentialists regard the meaning making process as central to existence and reject any a priori meaning of life, such as the one religion seems to supply (Helminiak, Hoffman, Dodson, 2012). They largely reject the idea of an all observing deity who judges the faults and weakness of humans and regard humans as entirely free (Bretherton, 2006). However, large factions within existentialism are devout Christians as well. Kierkegaard was an orthodox Christian and reflected his religious beliefs in his writings, often citing the leap into uncertainty of life as finding one's God. Christian theologian Paul Tillich and Jewish theologian Martin Buber are also notable figures within existential psychotherapy, who integrated their religious beliefs into the principles of existentialism. Rollo May was also known to incorporate his classical religious studies into the practice of psychotherapy (Helminiak, Hoffman & Dodson, 2012). Thus, existentialist psychotherapy is in no way atheistic and the negative public image is owed particularly to the prominence of the few atheistic individuals within the school. Although religious contradictions might come up during therapy, it doesn't necessarily impede the process in any way. While religion is definitely an important source of the meaning making process of any individual, the central issues of the existential philosophy are much larger than religion alone.

5. Conclusion

Existential philosophy and psychotherapy are definitely unique compared to the established approaches within psychology. It looks at human life and understanding from a subjective stance and values the individual will as a central component. Although it may not serve well to rigorous testing or fit in with dominant values of society, it exists as a dark horse in the field and functions as an alternative to mainstream epistemology within psychotherapy. It provides an avenue for deep reflection into each of our own lives and issues that we are too frightened to deal with. In a way, it exists on a higher plane to the prevailing knowledge within psychotherapy, and despite its flaws and inherent contradictions, its underlying presence reveals a haunting fact that we know nothing about the human condition and there is still room for a lot more to be learnt. Despite all the speculations and theorizing over the years, there is a good chance that we have been wrong all along and we exist as clueless beings unaware of our higher purpose or meaning. As Cushman (1996) bluntly said, "Nothing has cured the human race, and nothing is about to."

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Author Profile



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