

An Analysis of Existential Therapy from a Counseling Perspective

Mark Oliver

University of Houston – Clear Lake

Abstract

Existential theory is derived from the existential philosophy movement of the nineteenth century. There were several individuals instrumental in the development of existential therapy including Bugental, Frankl, May, and Yalom. It is not a concise theory but is a loose collection of theories centering on the meaning or purpose of life. However it is applicable to counseling because of its focus on the meaning of life which promotes clients well-being. The main therapeutic techniques are: Logotherapy, the "I-thou model", and the self-in-world concept. However since existential counseling is not a technique driven therapy, techniques from other therapies can be used effectively with an existential therapeutic focus. It appears applicable to a wide variety of counseling situations in which clients are seeking to resolve issues concerning the ultimate 'meaning of life' and does focus on the collaborative nature of the counselor – client relationship.

Existential therapy or counseling is classified as a humanistic theory by Maslow due to its focus on helping people achieve their full potential in life (Maddi, 1978). It is viewed more as an attitudinal or philosophical approach to counseling rather than a theory of therapy because it is loosely based on existential philosophy and it is not tied to any particular therapeutic technique (Sharf, 2004). Broadly defined, existential therapy encourages clients to develop a full comprehension of their personal meaning of life and purpose of existence in the universe (Frankl, 1997; Yalom, 1980). It is suggested that a counselor develop his or her own personal style of counseling which is based primarily on one theoretical perspective (Corey, 2009). The American Counseling Association's (ACA) Code of Ethics (2005) states that counselors should promote their clients' personal growth and development, including development of healthy interpersonal relationships, while honoring the diversity of their clients' cultural values. I chose existential therapy as my preferred theoretical base for counseling because this theory fits well with my personal style of counseling which includes the spiritual '12-step' philosophy. Furthermore it is not tied to any particular therapeutic technique but does promote the collaborative therapeutic counseling relationship, which also promotes the clients' personal growth and development, and helps clients resolve the ultimate struggle of determining their personal meaning (purpose) of life.

Existential theory grew out of existential philosophical movement of the nineteenth century which pondered human existence in the universe. Existential psychotherapy was

primarily developed after World War II as a reaction against the determinism of Freud's psychoanalysis and the mechanistic approach of behaviorism (Frankl, 1997; Yalom, 1980). Existential theory is not a concise theory since it was developed by many theorists throughout world of whom four of the best known are James Bugental, Viktor Frankl, Rollo May, and Irving Yalom (Corey, 2009; Szasz, 2005). Existential theory provides a counselor with a set of principles and constructs which serve as a guide to the foundation of the counseling practice (Spinelli, 2002). The development of existential therapy built on Adler's individual psychology and Jung's concept of a spiritual unconscious. Adler pointed out that to overcome feelings of inferiority people must develop interpersonal relationships and their individual life plans. Adler stressed importance of decision making in creating meaning in life and the importance of creating a sense of community. However, Adler still focused on childhood and birth order which Frankl stated was not important in the search for the ultimate meaning in life (Frankl, 1997; Maddi, 1978). Existential theorists are similarly concerned with spirituality and believe that self-transcendence is a spiritual matter, but they reject the concepts of archetypes and the collective unconscious (Frankl, 1997).

There are four main themes of existentialism, which are death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness, that each person must confront in his or her quest to answer the question of 'What is the ultimate meaning of human existence?' (Frankl, 1997; Yalom, 1980). It is the belief of existential therapists that failure to resolve these ultimate questions or conflicts results in the creation of an 'existential vacuum' that leads to existential anxiety which is ultimately the root of many psychological problems that people face (Frankl, 1997). The ultimate concern of death causes existential conflict because people know that life is finite and there is the desire to

continue to be (immortality). The ultimate conflict presented in freedom is the existential belief that ultimate freedom means absence of external structure. That means that a human does not enter into a well structured universe that has an 'inherited design' but must instead create (be responsible for) his or her own world, life design, choices, and actions. In an existential sense freedom comes with responsibility. The existential concern with isolation is not being isolated from others but instead being isolated from parts of oneself. In existential isolation the fact remains that no matter how much interpersonal contact a person has, he or she enters and leaves this world alone. The tension is between the awareness of one's isolation and the wish for contact, protection, and to be a part of a larger whole. If one must die, constitute his/her universe, be ultimately alone in an indifferent universe, then one's life can appear meaningless. This ultimate conflict is between a meaning seeking creature that is thrown into a meaningless universe (Yalom, 1980).

Existential therapy may be more applicable today than when it was first introduced due to more people are having feelings of meaninglessness and emptiness due to the fast pace of life in this modern impersonal technological world (Melton & Schulenburg, 2008). These feelings of emptiness and meaninglessness constitute what Frankl terms an 'existential vacuum' and manifests itself in boredom and apathy. Boredom expresses a loss of interest in the world and apathy portrays a lack of initiative to do something that matters or change something in the world (Frankl, 1997). This technological consumeristic society tries to satisfy all persons' needs and wants but instead creates the need to find and fulfill an authentic meaning in life without offering an opportunity to find that authentic meaning in life (Miers, 2002; Frankl, 1997). According to Frankl (1997), addiction, aggression, and depression are all

the result of this sense of futility. Society today appears to be more existentially minded due to this feeling of being lost and the feeling that life is meaningless (Blair, 2004; Yalom, 1980). Furthermore existential therapy is more applicable today because more people are dealing with the tragic triad of pain, guilt, and death as in dealing with end of life issues faced in terminal illnesses (Frankl, 1997). By facing a fate a person cannot change, one can 'transcend oneself' and grow beyond his or herself by changing oneself. By using existential therapy a person can turn suffering into human achievement and accomplishment, deriving change from guilt, and seeing in death an incentive to take action while one is still alive (Frankl, 1997).

Existential therapy is an appropriate for counselors to use because it is a client centered therapy and suggests a collaborative counselor-client relationship. In this process the counselor should listen empathetically and enter the phenomenological world of the client. In entering the world of the client, the counselor should "be present" as the client attempts to define his or her view of the world in this inter-relational worldview of therapy (Spinelli, 2002). In addition existential theory does not support the medical model and is more closely aligned with the wellness model of counseling (Halling, McNabb, & Rowe, 2006). Furthermore the counselor is encouraged to self-disclose times when he or she has 'stared into the existential void' of pain, suffering, and meaninglessness. Then the client will feel that the counselor knows how he or she really feels. In other words if counselors have been able to resolve life's big questions successfully they will be better able to help their clients who are facing these same universal human questions (Helminiak, 2001).

Although existential counseling is not a technique driven theory, there are some basic models for helping clients elucidate their personal meaning of life. One approach to counseling

from an existential phenomenological perspective has been described by Spinelli (2002). This theory requires the counselor to: (1) Set aside or bracket any preconceived beliefs, theories, biases, or assumptions; (2) explore the client's immediate conscious experience of "being with another" (the counselor); and (3) focus on the descriptive components of the client's life not theory driven interpretations of them. The existential counselor's function in the therapy process is to help the client clarify, evaluate, and possibly change the implicit, explicit, and fixed assumptions, values, and beliefs of the client's inter-relational world. Spinelli (2002) suggests that clients and our interactions with them can be seen through three realms based on Binswanger's 'Umwelt', 'Mitwelt', and 'Eigenwelt', with the fourth 'Überwelt' added by van Deurzen-Smith. The Umwelt can be described as the unique set of interpretations and meanings each of us makes on unique physical world we inhabit. The Mitwelt dimension focuses on how we interact with others in our world and how societal messages on age, race, gender, culture, language, and rules influence our development of differing attitudes and values. Basically our perception of our interactions with the public world. The Eigenwelt describes the intimate relationship each of us has with both ourselves and the significant others in our lives. How we view ourselves in the areas of self-confidence, self-acceptance, and individuality and how these views affect the relationships with significant others, families, and friends in our lives. These relationships with the people whom we are intimate in our lives can affect whether we feel our lives are meaningful, secure, or anxiety filled. The Überwelt describes our absolute and abstract constructs on life and how these are incorporated into our outlook on life. The beliefs about life, death, and existence which are the basis for all our subsequent beliefs and interpretations in life.

Spinelli (2002) describes these four realms of existence as the “I-focused”, the “You-focused”, the “we-focused”, and the “They-focused”. In the “I-focused” encounter the client is asked to describe the client’s experience of being in this interaction with the counselor. What messages does the client tell himself or herself about the interaction? In the “You-focused” realm the client is asked to clarify his/her experience with “the other” being in relationship with him/her. What messages does the client tell himself or herself about his or her experience of “the other” in any given situation? In the “We-focused” realm both the client and the counselor clarify their respective experience of the “we” in being in relation with each other while being in this encounter. In the “They-focused” realm the client is asked to describe his or her way of being from the significant others point of view. These realms highlight the client’s worldview both within the therapeutic relationship and in the client’s wider relational world. The client is then able to describe his or her worldview, and the behavior patterns, and underlying values, beliefs, and meanings that support that worldview. Once the client is aware of who he or she was, who he or she is, the client can explore alternatives on living life more fully and authentically.

The most widely used technique in existential therapy is Logotherapy developed by Viktor Frankl. Frankl (1967) states that Logotherapy is both a theory and a technique. It is based on the concept that having a reason for living or having a purpose (meaning) for life is necessary for the development of a worthwhile existence. Logotherapy is concerned with both the ontos (being) as well as the logos (meaning). Logotherapy is based on three fundamental assumptions which provide the order for finding meaning in life. These three assumptions are: (1) freedom of Will; (2) will to meaning; and (3) meaning of life.

The first tenet of 'freedom of will' is based on the concept that a human's freedom of will is based on data in the present. In other words will is the human capacity to choose how one responds to external circumstances. Although people cannot always influence the biological, sociological, or psychological conditions they may face, people can choose how they respond to those conditions. A technique used by Frankl to get people deal with their predicaments was paradoxical intention. In this technique he would suggest to the client to do the opposite of the behavior the client was struggling with. Humor is of the upmost importance to help a person rise above his or her own predicament and be able to view himself/herself in a more detached manner. According to Frankl this ability to choose remains intact under even the most dismal choices (including death) and even when there does not appear to be a freedom to choose there still is a choice (Frankl, 1967). Frankl's years spent in the Nazi concentration camps (1942 – 1945) offers experiential support for this assertion.

With the second assumption, 'The will to meaning' Frankl (1967, & 1997) argues that it is the most basic of human motivations. This 'will to meaning' was posed in opposition to Freud's will to pleasure and Adler's will to power. The key impetus of this concept is it allows for people to choose to search for the meaning they desire. This meaning can only be realized in relation to others or through a cause greater than him or herself. "Existence falters unless it is lived in terms of transcendence toward something beyond itself" (Frankl, p.12, 1967). The essence of meaning is that humans are responsible for fulfillment of their specific meanings of their personal lives. However human beings are also responsible to something whether it be society, humanity, mankind, one's own conscience, or a spiritual "Higher Power". According to Frankl, with meaning comes responsibility. If the will to meaning is thwarted an existential

vacuum results which can be exhibited by apathy and boredom.

The third and final assumption of Logotherapy is 'The meaning of life'. Frankl postulates that life can become meaningful in a threefold way. First through what we give in life through our creative works. Secondly, through what we take from life in terms of our values, and thirdly by our willingness to confront a fate we can no longer change such as an incurable disease, inoperable cancer or any other life threatening condition. Life has meaning under all circumstances including intense unavoidable suffering. The challenge of life is to find that unique meaning for each of us in our lives. The most basic of human motivations is to find purpose in life, is unique in each and every human being, which enables the individual to sustain through pain and suffering with dignity. From this viewpoint, self-actualization and fulfillment of happiness are not goals of life but instead are the result of finding one's purpose (Frankl, 1967 & 1997).

Another method of counseling, described by Miars, is based on Bugental's self-in-world construct system (as cited in Miars, 2002). This self-in-world construct system is described as the conception each person has of who and what one is and how the world operates. Each person answers the existential question of "How shall I live?" by the way each person constructs life each day. In counseling, the self-in-world constructs system is delineated by exploring at a subjective level, the personal meaning structures (beliefs) and self-perceptions due to the fact that these form the client's fundamental way of being in the world. Even though these constructs are central to a person's functioning they can operate at an unconscious level and as a result not be recognized by the client as the source of life's problems and resulting emotional distress. The self-in-world construct system allows a person to operate in world that

is existentially has no absolute structure and meaning which is the source of existential anxiety (which Frankl described as, existential vacuum). The client must become aware of his or her self-in-world construct system so that the systems can be modified to enable the client to have a more satisfying and adaptable life. Authenticity which is an existential concept that refers to autonomous self-creation of whom and what individuals are to become. To become authentic individuals must transcend enculturation and re-invent themselves from within. Miars discusses following Spinelli's steps for the actual counseling process that I previously described Bugental claims that by reclaiming authentic contact with their inner experiencing selves, clients can reduce existential anxiety which is causing them emotional distress (as cited in Miars, 2002). All clients, except for those experiencing extreme psychotic symptoms do have the will or power to choose how they think, feel, and act in the world (Frankl, 1997, & Miars, 2002). The pursuit of such choice and responsibility is the essence of being an authentic human being in the world (Miars, 2002).

In analyzing the effectiveness of existential counseling it becomes apparent that the issue of spirituality in counseling needs to be addressed. Previously mental health professionals had avoided discussion of this issue but recent trends appear to indicate that spirituality can be an instrumental technique in the counseling process (Frankl, 1997; Helminiak, 2001). Although the only mention of spirituality in the ACA (2005) Code of Ethics is in reference to end of life issues, the ACA held a conference on spirituality in counseling and subsequently developed a manual on using spirituality in the counseling process (Helminiak, 2001). Through my own personal experiences and as a Licensed Chemical Dependency Counselor (LCDC), I had found the use of spirituality in counseling to be beneficial. Furthermore the twelve Step programs

such as AA and NA discuss spirituality through the topics of 'Higher Power' and 'God of our own understanding' (*Narcotics Anonymous*, 1988). However as in any counseling session a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) must honor the culture and values on clients and not impose his or her values on the client. Nevertheless achievement of existential transcendence is a spiritual matter (Frankl, 1997; Helminiak, 2001).

There are strengths to counseling from an existential basis. It focuses on the choices available to the client in development 'purpose or meaning in life' (personal growth). The client defines his or her way of being in the world and subsequently the client defines his or her own meaning in life (personal autonomy) (Frankl, 1997; Helminiak, 2001; and Spinelli, 2002). There is evidence that existential counseling is effective in treating depression, addiction, developmental issues, grief and loss, changes in life, facing death, and life's existential anxieties (Corey, 2009; Blair, 2004; Helminiak, 2001; and Frankl, 1997). Existential therapy can be effective in working with a multi-cultural population since it does not prescribe a particular way of relating to the universe and because of its broad perspective (Corey, 2009). There are few studies on the actual success rate of existential counseling and what studies there are tend to measure purpose in life (Mascaro & Rosen, 2008). Frankl reports that there are several studies on Crumbaugh's Purpose-in-life (PIL) test that indicate that there is a negative correlation between purpose in life and fear of death (Frankl, 1997). In addition techniques from other theories can be implemented with existential therapy because it does not subscribe to a particular set of techniques per se (Corey, 2009).

There are some disadvantages of using existential theory in counseling. For example, it is not a clearly defined theory that lends itself to empirical validation (Mascaro & Rosen, 2008).

In addition Yalom (1980) reports that the PIL is based on vague conceptualization of existential meaning which leads to wide variations in interpretations of the variables and lessens the construct validity of the PIL test. In addition Mascaro and Rosen (2008) conducted a study of the PIL, and Battista and Almond's Life Regard Index (LRI) to verify the validity of the constructs in these measures using 574 undergraduate students participating in the psychology department's subject pool of a large southern university. The results of this study indicate that there was a small but significant link between developing a sense of meaning and reduced depression levels which were consistent with previous results. Consequently more research needs to be done on this issue and in developing techniques to help clients develop meaning in life. In addition to lack of empirical studies on existential therapy another weakness is that it is very individualistic and may not work well with clients from a collectivist culture. Furthermore the existential counseling model is not conducive to brief therapy (Corey, 2009). Likewise due to the lack of technique and simple constructs, existential counseling can be a difficult technique to effectively use (Spinelli, 2002).

The existential theory of counseling appears to be an appropriate theoretical base to use in counseling because it fits my style of counseling. It is supportive of the client finding meaning in life, which resolves the existential anxiety many people are feeling today. In addition the existential philosophy supports clients' spiritual growth but likewise can be used with a secular approach as well. One problem I could face with existential counseling is the limits from HMOs on the number of counseling sessions they would pay for. An additional problem I could have using this technique is the theory's lack of structure and models for implementation which could result in my not being effective in helping a client reach a state of

existential transcendence. However with practice and implementation of techniques from other theories, such as Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT), I should develop into an effective counselor using existential theory in counseling.

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