

## Counseling Research: A Practitioner-Scholar Approach

Background Edit

Development Edit

View of the human mind Edit

Existential therapy (of the American, existential-humanistic tradition) starts with the belief that although humans are essentially alone in the world, they long to be connected to others. People want to have meaning in one another's lives, but ultimately they must come to realize that they cannot depend on others for validation, and with that realization, they finally acknowledge and understand that they are fundamentally alone. The result of this revelation is anxiety in the knowledge that our validation must come from within and not from others.[19] Existential therapy is based on a theory of mind, and of psychology. In existentialism, personality is based on choosing to be, authentically, the real you, given an understanding based on a philosophical idea of what a person is. Therefore, practical therapeutic applications can be derived given a theory of personality, emotion, and "the good life." This leads to practical therapeutic applications like dealing with personal choices in life that lead to personal happiness. Personal happiness based on a concept of yourself as having the freedom of directing your life and making necessary changes (so to speak, a radical freedom). So, a full philosophical understanding of existentialism is basic to methods implemented for emotional and life changes. That is, a background in philosophy is basic to existential therapy. Philosophical issues of the self, personality, philosophy of mind, meaning of life, personal development are all fundamentally relevant to any practical therapeutic expectations.[1] Existentialism

Psychological dysfunction Edit

Because there is no single existential view, opinions about psychological dysfunction vary. For theorists aligned with Yalom, psychological dysfunction results from the individual's refusal or inability to deal with the normal existential anxiety that comes from confronting life's "givens": mortality, isolation, meaninglessness, and freedom.[20] For other theorists, there is no such thing as psychological dysfunction or mental illness.[citation needed] Every way of being is merely an expression of how one chooses to live one's life. However, one may feel unable to come to terms with the anxiety of being alone in the world. If so, an existential psychotherapist can assist one in accepting these feelings rather than trying to change them as if there is something wrong. Everyone has the freedom to choose how they are going to exist in life; however, this freedom may go unpracticed. It may appear easier and safer not to make decisions that one will be responsible for. Many people will remain unaware of alternative choices in life for various societal reasons.

The good life Edit

Existentialism suggests that it is possible for individuals to face the anxieties of life head on, embrace the human condition of aloneness and to revel

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in the freedom to choose and take full responsibility for their choices. They can aim to take control of their lives and steer themselves in any direction they choose. There is no need to halt feelings of meaninglessness but instead to choose and focus on new meanings for the living. By building, loving and creating, life can be lived as one's own adventure. One can accept one's own mortality and overcome the fear of death. Although the French author Albert Camus denied the specific label of existentialist in his novel, *L'Étranger*, the novel's main character, Meursault, ends the novel by doing just this. He accepts his mortality and rejects the constrictions of society he previously placed on himself, leaving him unencumbered and free to live his life with an unclouded mind.[21] Also, Gerd B. Achenbach has refreshed the Socratic tradition with his own blend of philosophical counseling, as has Michel Weber with his Chromatiques Center in Belgium. The strictly Sartrean perspective of existential psychotherapy is generally unconcerned with the client's past, but instead, the emphasis is on the choices to be made in the present and future. The counselor and the client may reflect upon how the client has answered life's questions in the past, but attention ultimately shifts to searching for a new and increased awareness in the present and enabling a new freedom and responsibility to act. The patient can then accept that they are not special and that their existence is simply coincidental, or without destiny or fate. By accepting this, they can overcome their anxieties and instead view life as moments in which they are fundamentally free.

### Four worlds Edit

Existential thinkers seek to avoid restrictive models that categorize or label people. Instead, they look for the universals that can be observed cross-culturally.[22] There is no existential personality theory which divides humanity into types or reduces people to part components. Instead, there is a description of the different levels of experience and existence with which people are inevitably confronted. The way in which a person is in the world at a particular stage can be charted on this general map of human existence (Binswanger, 1963; Yalom, 1980; van Deurzen, 1984). In line with the view taken by van Deurzen,[23] one can distinguish four basic dimensions of human existence:

the physical, the social, the psychological, and the spiritual. On each of these dimensions, people encounter the world and shape their attitude out of their particular take on their experience. Their orientation towards the world defines their reality. The four dimensions are interwoven and provide a complex four-dimensional force field for their existence. Individuals are stretched between a positive pole of what they aspire to on each dimension and a negative pole of what they fear. Binswanger proposed the first three of these dimensions from Heidegger's description of Umwelt and Mitwelt and his further notion of Eigenwelt. The fourth dimension was added by van Deurzen from Heidegger's description of a spiritual world (Äberwelt) in Heidegger's later work.[23][24]

**Physical dimension** Edit On the physical dimension (Umwelt), individuals relate to their environment and the givens of the natural world around them. This includes their attitude to the body they have, to the concrete surroundings they find themselves in, to the climate and the weather, to objects and material possessions, to the bodies of other people, their own bodily needs, to health and illness and their mortality. The struggle on this dimension is, in general terms, between the search for domination over the elements and natural law (as in technology, or in sports) and the need to accept the limitations of natural boundaries (as in ecology or old age). While people generally aim for security on this dimension (through health and wealth), much of life brings a gradual disillusionment and realization that such security can only be temporary. Recognizing limitations can deliver a significant release of tension.

**Social dimension** Edit On the social dimension (Mitwelt), individuals relate to others as they interact with the public world around them. This dimension includes their response to the culture they live in, as well as to the class and race they belong to (and also those they do not belong to). Attitudes here range from love to hate and from cooperation to competition. The dynamic contradictions can be understood concerning acceptance versus rejection or belonging versus isolation. Some people prefer to withdraw from the world of others as much as possible. Others blindly chase public acceptance by going along with the rules and fashions of the moment. Otherwise, they try to rise above these by becoming trendsetters themselves. By acquiring fame or other forms of power, individuals can attain dominance over others temporarily. Sooner or later, however, everyone is confronted with both failure and aloneness.

**Psychological dimension** Edit On the psychological dimension (Eigenwelt), individuals relate to themselves and in this way create a personal world. This dimension includes views about their character, their past experience and their future possibilities. Contradictions here are often experienced regarding personal strengths and weaknesses. People search for a sense of identity, a feeling of being substantial and having a self. But inevitably many events will confront them with evidence to the contrary and plunge them into a state of confusion or disintegration. Activity and passivity are an important polarity here. Self-affirmation and resolution go with the former and surrender and yielding with the latter. Facing the final dissolution of self that comes with personal loss and the facing of death might bring anxiety and confusion to many who have not yet given up their sense of self-importance.

**Spiritual dimension** Edit On the spiritual dimension

(Äberwelt) (van Deurzen, 1984), individuals relate to the unknown and thus create a sense of an ideal world, an ideology, and a philosophical outlook. It is there that they find meaning by putting all the pieces of the puzzle together for themselves. For some people, this is done by adhering to a religion or other prescriptive worldview; for others, it is about discovering or attributing meaning in a more secular or personal way. The contradictions that must be faced on this dimension are often related to the tension between purpose and absurdity, hope and despair. People create their values in search of something that matters enough to live or die for, something that may even have ultimate and universal validity. Usually, the aim is the conquest of a soul or something that will substantially surpass mortality (as in having contributed something valuable to humankind). Facing the void and the possibility of nothingness are the indispensable counterparts of this quest for the eternal.

Research support Edit

There has not been a tremendous amount of research on existential therapy. Much of the research focuses on people receiving therapy who also have medical concerns such as cancer. Despite this, some studies have indicated positive efficacy for existential therapies with certain populations. Qualitative research has shown there is a positive learning outcome of Existential Therapy.[25][26] Overall, however, more research is needed before definitive scientific claims can be made.[27] An overview of research in Existential and Phenomenological Therapy was provided in the magnum opus on the approach, *The Wiley World Handbook of Existential Therapy*, edited by Emmy van Deurzen with Erik Craig, Alfried Laengle, Kirk Schneider, Digby Tantam and Simon du Plock. Joel Vos wrote this chapter in which he remarked that Dilthey, and many other phenomenological philosophers and therapists, have tried to turn the scientific paradigm more towards an inside understanding the subjectively lived experiences from clients, therapists and what happens in their relationship and in the therapeutic processes. Phenomenological research is now standard in most doctoral trainings in counselling psychology, providing a rich array of existential findings and demonstrating the importance of qualitative understanding alongside quantitative understanding of human existence. Clinical trials on meaning based therapies have shown them to be helpful in enabling clients to live meaningful lives despite their setbacks, limitations and difficulties.

See also Edit

References Edit

## Reference

[Users' Guides to the Medical Literature: A Manual for Evidence-Based Clinical Practice \(Medical/Denistry\)](#)

[Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research](#)