

Human development and existential counselling psychology

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Content & Focus: *This paper argues for the coherence of an existential approach to human development with the principles of counselling psychology. It first reviews the points of contact between existentialism and counselling psychology and then briefly reviews current approaches to human development and compares them epistemologically. Following this, the principles of an existential theory are reviewed. Then some examples from the phenomenological and existential literature are reviewed and conclusions drawn about the implications for theories of human development. Finally, some guidelines for existential counselling psychology practice are given.*

Keywords: *Process; paradox and dilemma; opening; meaning and purpose; freedom and responsibility.*

BOTH ORLANS AND VAN SCOYOC (2008) and Cooper (2009) emphasise the practical values of counselling psychology, and Kasket (2011, p.5) reinforces this by referring to counselling psychology as a ‘particularly honest, realistic, courageous member of the family of Applied Psychologies’.

This point about application is significant as it is also made by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1973), which positioned existentialism as a practical discipline that addressed the process and contextual nature of human issues. Existential counselling psychology could be seen as a practical application of philosophy to everyday living. However, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by a philosophical approach and what its implications are.

Existential philosophy is fundamentally an enquiry into personal meaning, and everything we do has a philosophical basis – assumptions about the nature of truth, reality and the origin of human meaning underlie every human action. Other therapeutic approaches are primarily biological, psychological, social, or spiritual and concentrate on the individual, either interpersonally or intrapersonally. While the existential perspective’s field of vision includes

these areas, it reaches beyond the individual to consider the human condition in a wider philosophical and socio-political context. Also, rather than thinking about function and dysfunction, it prefers to think in terms of a person’s ability to meet the challenges that life inevitably presents (van Deurzen & Adams, 2011, p.9). Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1962) uses the phrase ‘being-in-the-world’ to refer to the way we are simultaneously making and being made by the world we are in. In this sense we are inseparable from the world and we find out about the world by engaging with it, not simply by observing it. This also aligns it with counselling psychology.

The overall aim of the existential counselling psychologist is to make this philosophical questioning practical and to work with the client in their search for their own truth throughout their life with an open mind and an attitude of wonder, rather than fitting the client overtly or covertly into established frameworks of interpretation. We know only too well that when our assumptions are not clear, they will influence our conclusions. It means that we have to be prepared to examine our assumptions about life, and this is not a weakness or an acknowledgment of a flaw in our perception, it is a

principle of our phenomenological engagement with life processes, and we become aware of it through reflexivity (Finlay, 2011).

By preferencing human meaning, both counselling psychology and existentialism acknowledge a plurality of viewpoints and a variety of potential meanings. There is no final truth waiting to be discovered.

Approaches to human development

Although counselling psychology has always taken a life-span perspective, the field of human development has been dominated by three principles which have been summarised by Keenan and Evans (2009).

1. Continuity versus discontinuity. The issue here is whether development is gradual, or in steps or stages. Stage theory has been hugely influential, and many theories have been suggested, each with a different number of stages. Piaget (1952) is one example.
2. Stability versus change. The issue here is in what sense does a person become different from the way they were. This question is tied into the debate about the importance of early experience, with the consequent idea that a person can become as if 'stuck' at an earlier time and hence not change. Erikson's (1963) theory is about how childhood experiences can influence later life in this way.
3. Nature versus nurture. While extreme either-or positions have been taken on this in the past (e.g. Gesell, 1928, and Watson, 1928), the discussion now focuses on the interaction between the two, for example, Plomin et al. (2001).

Although some ideas derived from these debates undoubtedly have some resonance with everyday experience, they are unable to account for the very qualities that are most distinctive of human life – the ability to choose, to hope and to love and the need to live with meaning and purpose. The reason for this is that the natural science research method which seeks causation and fixed laws has been dominant in the development of theories of human development.

An alternative approach has been taken by Baltes (Baltes, Reese & Lipsitt, 1980; Baltes, 1987), who described his lifespan approach more as a general orientation to the study of development. As such, it is characterised by four propositions (Sugarman, 2001, p.13). Firstly, that development is a lifelong process. Secondly, that development is an expression of biological, socialisation, historical and cultural processes. Thirdly, that restricted definitions of the nature of development are inappropriate, and fourthly, that lifespan theory can offer an integrative umbrella under which different aspects of development can be explored and understood.

All these propositions, but particularly the fourth, make a lifespan approach compatible with both counselling psychology and existentialism.

What makes a theory existential

Warnock (1970) suggests that there are three basic principles that all existential theories share.

The first is that 'existence comes before essence' (Sartre, 1973, p.26). This means that the fact that we are – what existentialists call our existence, is more basic than what we are – what existentialists call our essence. We come into being – into existence – and then we make something – our essence – out of what we are given. Existentially, as Heidegger (1962) says, we are 'thrown' into our lives. This means that certain facts of our existence like our genetic make-up, family circumstances, gender, race, culture as well as the fact that we are born in the first place, are imposed upon us without any choice. We are also thrown out of our lives in the sense that we do not know when we will die. On our path through life from birth to death, we start with something we are given which is neither ours nor requested – our individual existence – and our life task is to make it into something which is personal and owned... only to lose it when we die. Existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus describe this situation as 'absurd', and the most basic

challenge of life, of human development, is to find a way to live with this absurdity and discover ways of being that get us what we decide we need, bearing in mind that what we need changes as we go through life. Inseparable from existence – being, comes the awareness of non-being – death, the awareness of how much time we have left to live (Adams, 2006, 2013; Heidegger, 1962). Existentially, time can be thought of as having two dimensions. There is clock time, which is regular and linear. One minute follows the previous at the same rate and will always do so. Then there is existential time, lived time, and it is more accurate to say that we are temporal, we are in time. We move in a perpetually changing present with our past behind and future ahead of us. In this sense, the past and future are contained within the present. When existentialists talk about the present, they mean a present that contains all that has happened and all that will happen. If anything, the future is primary because we have desires about what we want to be, but we are also aware of the certainty of death and the problem of how to live a meaningful life before we die.

Our consciousness of our thrownness leads to the second principle – personal responsibility (Warnock, 1970, p.12). When viewed existentially, what we come to think of as our essence, our ‘personality’, our ‘self’, is actually a matter of interpretation and choice that changes throughout life and is the result of the way we meet the fundamental givens of our personal existence at any particular moment. Existentialists prefer to use the phrase ‘sense-of-self’, and the hyphens are important because they reinforce the primacy of experience and also that there is no ‘true’ self to live up to as it is a natural science based concept. When Sartre wrote (2003, p.129) that ‘To be free is to be condemned to be free’, he meant that we have responsibility for our lives, whether we like it or not. Existentially, our autonomy is this fundamental. We are born into it. We are obviously not free to be anything we like, we are constrained by circumstance and

context – what existentialists call facticity – but our stance to this is ours and ours alone. We only see ourselves as fixed, or as existentialists say, ‘sedimented’, because it evokes too much anxiety – existential anxiety – to acknowledge that we are the product of our choices and actions. When we understand this, we can choose whether to be the active creator of our own life, or a passive recipient of a life. Letting go of the idea that we are determined by the past gives us freedom but also brings the responsibility to change. Heidegger (1962) uses the word authenticity to describe this process, and its meaning is rather different from the way it is used in the humanistic tradition. Existentially, authenticity is not normative, the clue to its meaning is in the first four letters, ‘auth...’, because it refers to the degree to which thrownness, absurdity, can be owned and a person can accept their existential responsibilities at any particular moment. Because this responsibility is hard to accept, we tend to evade and deny it, we close down our possibilities, imagining that our life will become easier and simpler, and in a sense it does, except that it also becomes narrower and less flexible. It will also lead us to feeling stuck.

The questions illustrated by these first two principles have been summarised in more immediate, experience-near terms by Vandenberg (1991, p.1278) as, ‘How do we explain the randomness and wonder of finding ourselves alive? Why are we here? What happens when we die?’ He says moreover that they are not simply solvable epistemological queries, they are unsolvable existential questions (Yalom, 1980). Being unsolvable, they become the backdrop of the whole of our lives.

The third principle is about how the theory is arrived at.

To know anything with any reliability we have to use a research method appropriate to the data and the research question. Phenomenology challenges the natural scientific notion of the objective observer by asserting that we can never get outside of life

in order to observe it. We are always participant observers.

The relationship between existentialism and phenomenology is that existential thought is the body of knowledge that arises when the systematic research method of phenomenology is applied to the study of human existence. The practice of existential counselling psychology is based on phenomenology, and in this way there is an intimate and ethical connection between theory and practice. By being phenomenological, we allow existential issues and concerns to come to light.

Any investigation which attempts to find out something not already known is a piece of research, and all counselling psychology practice can be regarded as a new piece of research. Therapeutically, it is about working with the client to understand the meaning of their life and simultaneously about how the existential counselling psychologist is making sense of the process. This reflexivity has three dimensions, personal, methodological, and epistemological (Kasket, 2011, p.10). Personal reflexivity is about acknowledging that one's position on an issue has the potential to affect one's conclusions about it. Methodological reflexivity acknowledges how we help shape our conclusions, and epistemological reflexivity involves an acknowledgement that the method itself shapes the conclusions. These issues are as relevant for a researcher doing formal phenomenological research as for an existential counselling psychologist.

Approaching human development phenomenologically and existentially

Phenomenologically, as participant observers, we are always situated in a context from which we view and construct the world. Straight away this presents a problem (Briod, 1989). Simply by virtue of having a chronologically adult point of view, there is a before (childhood) and an after (old age). This can give rise to the idea of three parts or stages of life. Moreover, childhood is reconstructed, remembered, on the basis of the current

present, whereas adulthood is viewed as presently happening, there is no way to get any perspective on it. Old age is usually viewed from the position of adulthood, of having no first-hand experience of it. In this way, our current age becomes the moving pivot point from which we view not only our own life, but life itself.

Another point is that although a natural part of human functioning, language is not objective, it is a construction made in the light of what existentialists call our worldview (Adams, 2013; Spinelli, 2005). It helps us to order experience along particular personal, social and cultural lines. This means that it reflects an epistemology, and it is therefore important when talking about human development to use words consistent with the principles of existentialism. Words like instinct, maturing, ripening and evolving have biological resonances, whereas words like transforming, building, or retrieving have technological implications. None of these words are true to experience. Phenomenologically, life is dynamic, continuing, in flux, permanently changing, constantly uncertain. Life is change. Borrowing from Heidegger (1962), Briod (1989, p.19) suggests that a more appropriate word is 'opening', in the sense of a life-long opening to the awareness of our fundamental freedom and responsibility.

Human development as such has not so far been a major concern for existential philosophers, but a common theme relevant in different ways at different ages and circumstances is the pervasiveness of dilemma and paradox (Adams, 2006; van Deurzen, 2009; van Deurzen & Adams, 2011; Wong, 2012; Yalom, 1980). The way a person is at any particular time of their life can be seen in terms of four basic dimensions or experiential worlds – the physical world, the social world, the personal world and the ethical world (Binswanger, 1963; van Deurzen, 2009; Yalom, 1980); each of these expose a dilemma which can only be solved by embracing a paradox (van Deurzen & Adams, 2011).

- The paradox of the physical world is that although physical death will kill me and the denial of death will destroy the time I have left, the idea of death can save me by prompting me to live my life more fully.
- The paradox of the social world is that only awareness of my separateness can help me understand and respect the otherness of the other.
- The paradox of the personal world is that the freedom that comes when I acknowledge I am weak and vulnerable allows me to access responsibility and personal strength.
- The paradox of the ethical world is that only when I realise there is no right way to live that I have to work out how I want to live.

The overarching dilemma these are all derived from is, 'How can I live as if there is certainty while knowing that there is none'.

Meaning and purpose is born out of the perpetual tension evoked by these unsolvable dilemmas and paradoxes. We create meaning through struggling with courage through adversity and by gaining a successively richer understanding of the paradoxes of existence. We gain a resilient and coherent sense-of-self because of, and not in spite of, our ability to be different in different circumstances (Denne & Thompson, 1991).

Existentially, with respect to paradox and dilemma, human development is about each individual's pathway that leads from birth, when these paradoxes are not understood, to existential maturity and wisdom – which is by no means guaranteed anyway – when they are understood.

With respect to infancy and the beginnings of life Laing says:

'Biological birth is a definitive act whereby the infant organism is precipitated into the world [...] Under usual circumstances, the physical birth of a new living organism into the world inaugurates rapidly ongoing processes whereby [...] the infant feels real and alive and has a sense of being an entity

with continuity in time and a location in space. In short, physical birth and biological aliveness are followed by the baby becoming existentially born as real and alive. Usually this development is taken for granted.' (1965, p.41)

In this short sketch he is saying that physical birth is the starting point for an organic process of opening to the world, but which nevertheless is capable of being interrupted, and that this opening leads to a relatively resilient sense-of-self and purpose. This is what he calls becoming existentially born. Being a process, it is never finished. The person is perpetually in the process of being born, and simultaneously of dying. This is another paradox.

In his writing about child development, the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964) asks two basic questions:

1. If early development has an influence on later life, then how does this happen?
2. How is it that a person, who is a mass of sensations that are not directly available to another, gets the idea that an other person is in some way similar and, therefore, that mutual understanding is possible?

He uses Piaget and Inhelder's (1958) term, de-centring, in an existential sense. He suggests that from birth, as we gradually open to existence, we are exposed to an endless succession of experiences that de-centre us, that challenge our fixed sense of ourselves in the world. For him, the moment when an infant realises that they are seeing themselves, not someone else, in a mirror, is one such experience. After this moment the world is a different far more uncertain place. The infant has to accommodate the possibility of seeing themselves as others see them. As Merleau-Ponty says (1964 p.137), '...there is a conflict between the me as I feel myself and the me as I see myself or as others see me'.

When we 'see' phenomenologically, the more we realise that our understanding is always relative to our viewpoint and also that we will only ever have one viewpoint, even

though we may remember or imagine others. Narcissism is the refusal to accept that one's view is only one view, that one is not the centre of the universe. The existence of another view is a challenge to our freedom. Opening to our thrownness is a constant challenge to our narcissism (Adams, 2013).

Life is constant de-centring and we are constantly reminded of our existential ungroundedness.

Sartre (2003) is concerned with the same question but from another direction. He asks: where does the sense-of-self come from – existentially? Following on from the principle that existence precedes essence, he says:

1. Since we are nothing, potentially we can be anything.
2. This evokes anxiety so we make ourselves into something, but this leads us into an awareness that we are limiting our potential. He calls this bad faith.

Like Merleau-Ponty, Sartre says that from birth the individual's active and direct experience of the world forms the basis of the sense-of-self. As such, infancy is crucially important (Barnes, 1993; Sartre, 1997, p.70). He is concerned with the origin of consciousness and identity and suggests that from the beginning we search for reliable patterns on which to ground ourselves and we gradually identify what he calls a 'fundamental project' (Cannon, 1991; Sartre, 2003, p.721) on the basis of context-derived choices which we then apply to other contexts. We view the original event as factual rather than chosen in the desire to avoid the anxiety of freedom and responsibility and to make an autobiography that gives the impression of coherence and purpose (Fivush, 2011). Despair is when we feel our stories are losing this. (Stolorow, 2007). Although Sartre talks about the fundamental project forming round a significant event, Stern (1985) and Holmes (2001) suggest that it is derived from a simplification of our random and largely incoherent experiences into a small number

of coherent and prototypical 'memories' which are actually constructions, that come to epitomise our fundamental relationship to others and to the world. Because of its existential rather than cognitive nature, the fundamental project is more likely to be embodied and is about our place in the world – our stance to dilemma, paradox and uncertainty.

Implications for existential counselling psychology practice

Until recently existential practitioners have been reluctant to make concrete guidelines for practice (Adams, 2013; Spinelli, 2007; van Deurzen, 2012; van Deurzen & Adams, 2011), but all writers agree that existential counselling practice is based on the principles of phenomenological practice rather than prescribed theory. It can be thought of as consisting of two parts, both of which are underpinned by a quality of attention characterised by a reflexive openness both to the client's unfolding meanings and also to ourselves (Adams, 2013; van Deurzen & Adams, 2011). Our ability to attend is correlated with our ability to live with uncertainty, and as long as we attend, we will become increasingly aware of our assumptions, which we need to put aside so that we can attend better. Our interventions at the beginning will be mainly clarificatory in order to seek further description, but sooner or later we will be able to be more challenging and probing. At this time we will be drawing attention to the ways the client evades and denies their agency. Since life is continuous process, our natural 'state' is one of change. In existential counselling psychology practice we do not work on change, we work on resistance to change, on stopping stopping. Having said that, there is always a dilemma because we live in a tension between constancy – the desire for reliability, and change – the desire for challenge. This always needs to be acknowledged and respected. The word 'care' is much used in the therapeutic literature, but it has a particular meaning existentially. When we care for

someone, what we care for is their autonomy, and as autonomy is so central to the generation of human meaning, the existential counselling psychologist will need to know how to adapt and monitor their practice such that both their own autonomy and that of the client is recognised. This is done in the knowledge that mistakes will always be made in which the counselling psychologist will either over or under estimate the client's capacity for autonomous action. Indeed, trying to do this is probably the best we can manage, and a measure of the success of the counselling, as in life, is in the way these misunderstandings are met, negotiated and understood.

The presence of a client in counselling means that the natural change process of life is being resisted. Clients come to us when they feel their autobiography is not making enough sense, or has ceased to make enough sense. They come when they are feeling existentially de-centred, and the natural processes of re-centring are being resisted. By being phenomenological and focusing on experience, by describing and not explaining, by resisting giving interpretations but making the work itself interpretive, and by drawing attention to the ways the client evades and denies their part in their lives, we reintroduce the client to change and to personal responsibility and hence a greater understanding of the Law of Existential Consequence (Adams, 2013), which is that when I do something, something follows that I have to take responsibility for. Existentially, human development involves a progressively greater understanding of this principle, and this understanding will only end on death.

Many people come to a counselling psychologist with the idea that when they find out what really happened in their past, their present and future will become clear. A person is born, then dies and we see our clients at some point between birth and death. Our existential task is to help them find out as much as they can about how their past choices led to their current actions and

future intentions. The question, 'why now?' is an existential question because it situates the client in the intensity of the unsatisfactory meeting point between the past and the future. Why is the client in counselling now? Why are they thinking about their lives in this way now? Why is the crisis happening now? Out of the discomfort of the urgency to live a fulfilling life in the remaining time can come the possibility of change. Existentially, well-being does not depend upon the search for the key memory and its correct interpretation, rather than a fluid dialectic between story making and story breaking. A task of the existential counselling psychologist is to be, as Holmes (2001) says, an assistant autobiographer. Existential well-being is not just about being able to update autobiography in line with current experience but also about realising that there is no guarantee that the current meaning will last beyond the present moment. This can be existentially unsettling because it undermines our need for constancy and reliability. When the client is able to identify the current meaning of their fundamental project, they will be able to reassess it in the light of current experience and desire, so that the choice can be revisited and remade, not once and for all but so that life can again become a source of wonder, aliveness and surprise. This is what is meant by living as if there is certainty while knowing that there is none. The existential counselling psychologist has no vested interest in what particular decision is taken, simply that the client be able to own whatever decision they take about their future. Our task is to assist them in this existential act of choosing. In doing this, the existential realities of freedom, choice and responsibility come to replace the determinist fantasies of causation and passivity. When clients understand this, they can choose whether to be the active creator of their life or a passive recipient of a life, and they can continue in the never-ending process of, as Laing (1965) put it, of being existentially born.

Conclusion

The developmental model most consistent with an existential-phenomenological view that a person is the product of their choices and actions, is a life-long process model. In our desire to have 'continuity in time and a location in space' (Laing, 1965, p.41), to be something rather than nothing, we actively construct a coherent sense-of-self out of the random events of our lives in order to give ourselves meaning and purpose. In this way we daily encounter our thrownness and realise not only that our finite life is no one else's responsibility but our own, but also that it is the product of chance and opportunity. Existentially, the developmental task for the whole of life is to find a way to live with this.

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