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Existential Theory as an Essential Ingredient of the Counselling Process

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Abstract. Existential thought which is rooted in philosophy, literature and theology, plays an important role in counselling process. Existence of several elements in this kind of thought can be regarded as a big testimony for the claim. Nevertheless, there are many existential counsellors who have concentrated only on one aspect of existential thought. This consideration has been positively effective during the counselling process. However, it seems that integrating all existential elements to form a unique therapy is a necessity in the counselling process. This study aims to outline the existence of several elements in existential thought and in this way provides an existential therapeutic model in counselling.

Keywords: Existence, Essence, Freedom, Meaninglessness, Counselling process

1. Introduction

Existential counselling is an approach which comes from the ideas, concepts, and insights which have been founded in existential philosophy, literature, and theology (Frankl, 1988; Lantz, 1997; Lantz & Raiz, 2004; May, 1983; Yalom, 1980). Some research studies have shown that utilizing existential therapy can be regarded as a useful treatment approach for clients who have encountered problems such as chronic illness, migrating issues, assault, rape, and cancer (Frankl, 1988; Lantz, 1996; Lantz & Raiz, 2004; Yalom, 1980). It seems that the existence of variety of potentials in existential thought leads to form and make several therapeutic approaches such as Logotherapy, Daseinsanalysis, The American Existential Humanistic Approach, and The British School of Existential Analysis. Despite the previous studies which have considered only some parts of the aforementioned approaches, the present study includes all and aims to outline those fundamental existential concepts which have positive influence on counselling and psychology during the therapeutic process in order to provide a comprehensive and therefore a unique existential model for counselling.

2. Fundamental Elements in Existentialism

2.1. The Meaning of Existence

In order to have a comprehensive understanding about Existential Thought, one needs to know the meaning of "existence" and its difference in comparison with "being." The word "exist" originates from the Latin verb *existere*, which means to stand out (Macquarrie, 1972) or an upsurge (Sartre, 2003), or a doing, becoming or a process (Cooper, 2003) in the world. The objects in the world are beings which are fixed, inflexible, and unable to evolve; human being, in contrast, is a being that can be aware of his possibilities and abilities in the world. Moreover, the Latin verb shows existence of freedom in mankind as human being

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can act consciously and at the same time freely in the world. By doing in the world, human being makes his future.

2.2. The Precedence of Existence

In his essential sentence which contains some existential necessary elements, Sartre states, "Freedom is existence, and in its existence precedes essence.... Man's essence is his existence" (2003, p. 5). By highlighting the fact that the existence of human being precedes his essence, Sartre declares that everything, every condition, and every event happens by human being; "There would be no essences —no truth, no structure in reality, no logical forms nor any morality—except as man in affirming his freedom makes these truths" (May, 1962). In another register, the philosophies of essence concentrate on the logical discovery of the patterns and rules of the world including human world. This concentration results in the ability to predict and manage what will happen similarly; in this kind of thought human being is an entity which is unchangeable, and he is foreseeable, because his essence precedes his existence. Since there are so many characteristics which all human beings have in common, knowing a single attitude in one's personality may lead to understand the personality of all human beings—bearing in mind that there is no difference among human beings. This kind of approach led to the development of essentialist psychologies such as behaviourism and psychoanalysis, where the concrete individual was broken down into such constitutive parts as stimuli and response, id and superego (Cooper, 2003).

In contrast, existential philosophers' concerns are human flexibility, human intentionality, human freedom, and human adaptability which all are regarded as philosophy of existence (Cooper, 2003; Lantz, 1994a). Existential philosophers have argued that, in order to have a precise understanding of human being, they need to ignore abstract hypotheses and philosophical theories instead of focusing solely on concrete existence of a human being as it is actually lived in itself. Therefore, utilizing creativity, freedom and responsibility are emphasized by existential counsellors (Lantz & Gregoire, 2000b), while they are showing a great legacy in the well known sentence of Sartre (2003), "existence precedes essence." Hence, from an existential point of view, existential counselling concepts such as pattern, problems, factors of influence, and causation, which are matters of essence, depend on existential issues such as love, friendship, courage, loyalty, fidelity, hope and freedom which can only be understood through encounter, participation and communication (Lantz, 2004; Yalom, 1980).

2.3. Existence and Freely Choosing

The spirit of existential thought is human being's free choice (Cooper, 2003; Macquarrie, 1972; May, 1962; Sartre, 2003). As a matter of fact, the concept of freedom is an essential element in existential philosophy (Frankl, 1988; Heidegger, 1962; Lantz, 2004b; Sartre, 2003). Yalom and Lantz emphasize that change will happen if individuals use their freedom and decide to act in a more functional way (Lantz, 1994a; Yalom, 1980). Therefore, any theory and presumption which asserts that the feelings, behaviours and thoughts of human beings are under unmanageable circumstances are not acceptable from an existential point of view. Sartre points out, "Man does not exist first in order to be free subsequently; there is no difference between the being of a man and his being-free" (2003, p. 25). Human being is nothing but freedom; there is nothing to force or cause him to act in the world but his action is the outcome of his free decision.

It appears that the above mentioned perspective has two results: Firstly, happiness, well-being, and pleasure in one's lifetime depend on his attitude towards surrounding world rather than being ulterior reality because one is free even in his perception and attitude. Secondly, with consideration that decision-making has a fundamental role in the life, motivation can be seen in the same line as the main issue in human being's actions. Indeed, one's decision that "life is or is not worth living" (Camus, 1955) and the meaning of life is to be happy or to help others absolutely are based on one's motivation which guides an individual to make decision. Furthermore, given human being's freedom of choice and making one's essence by one's decision, consequently there would be no denying fact that each human existence is unique since he builds his own essence out of his own free decision. This echoes Yalom who eloquently states, "the individual is inexorably alone" (1980, p. 353). From this perspective one can notice that individuals have personal and particular dimensions.

2.4. Existence and Limitations

The Freedom of choice is one of the essential issues in existentialism (Flanagan & Flanagan, 2004; Gould, 1993); but the most significant one is related to the determinations of personal freedom within the context of one's life in the world. Nevertheless, the existence of freedom for human beings leads to the existence of some limitations for him (Lantz & Gregoire, 2000b). One's freedom, for instance, is not a choice; human being cannot choose not to be free. If he wants to choose so it means that he is still making a choice (Cooper, 2003; Macquarrie, 1972). Moreover, "facticity" is used by Heidegger (1962) and Sartre (2003) to indicate the limitations of human beings. Individuals find themselves thrown into particular factual condition that is not out of making a choice (Heidegger, 1962). The term "thrownness" refers to the fact that some issues, namely, born on the especial day, particular place and parents do not come from one's freedom. In fact, although there are varieties of choices during an individual's life time, but the starting point of human being, born, and the ending point, death, do not belong to one's free realm. However, Existentialists believe that the limitations are core ingredients of freedom and responsibility (Frankl, 1984; Lantz, 2004).

From an existential point of view, these limitations have meaning if one becomes aware that how he can face and deal with these limitations. Admittedly, the free choice of human being has positive meaning if responded to the limitations in a radiant way (Lantz, 2004). So speaking, freedom and its limitations lead to an essential element, namely, responsibility. It means that existential counselors help clients to become aware of their situations in the world; they are responsible for whatever they do and whatever they choose. There is nothing but my choice which results into my responsibility all over my lifetime. Consequently, existentialism strongly emphasizes personal choice, personal consciousness, and personal responsibility. If humans construct their own reality and are continuously capable of self-reinvention, then the individuals own all behaviours.

2.5. Meaninglessness

The classic existential trauma or existential neurosis may happen when one faces the question "What is the meaning of my life?" To find the meaning and purpose of one's life can be an agonizing process. People are tormented everyday by like questions that underlie in the existential crisis: What do we live for? What is the meaning of life? Given I will die, so what is the reason that I must live unluckily? If an individual cannot come to a satisfying and at the same time reasonable answer to these questions he will see his whole life in ruin. Albert Camus(1955) believes that the only serious philosophical question in man's life is whether one should go on living at the time he fully realized the meaninglessness of human life. Camus(1955) continues, "I have seen many people die because life for them was not worth living."

Thus said, the question of life's meaning can be seen undoubtedly as the most urgent question in human life (Yalom, 1980, p. 420). In this light, the existence of "meaning" in life definitely plays a significant role in one's motivation for continuing the life. From an Existential point of view, human beings can tolerate all suffering and life adversities, but they cannot continue their life without having a meaning for it. One cannot deny that sadness is an ingredient of existence and a part of a full and meaningful life. Yalom(1980) affirms:

"We bring it into effect through how we exist, how we live our lives, how we interact with the world, and how we deal with our fellow humans. Everything that is could as well have been otherwise; that human beings constitute themselves, their world, and their situation within that world; that there exists no 'meaning' no grand design in the universe, no guidelines for living other than those the individual creates" (p. 423)

Frankl, comparing to many other existential theorists, has a greater focus on the significance of living a meaningful life. Frankl (1988) declares that one has freedom to seek the meaning in his existence and psychosocial circumstances. At the moment an individual fails to grasp the full meaning of his life, the inevitable consequence would be existential vacuum. It is noteworthy that all human being at one point in life may happen to experience such trauma. The mentioned vacuum can be filled by both a developing sense of meaning or by psychiatric and existential symptoms such as anxiety, depression, despair, confusion, and the experience of anomie (meaninglessness) (Lantz, 1986). To name three kinds of meaning one can refer to the meaning of life, the freedom to will and the will to meaning (Frankl, 1988). Frankl (1988) emphatically declares that life does have meaning and although there are diverse ways to reach to the meaning of life but each individual's choice of path is quite unique. Any person will die finally, suffer before die, and happens

occasionally in life to encounter the responsibility he has and at some points will experience the existential guilt which is related to the reality that no one is able to fulfil one's responsibility to life thoroughly.

3. From Existential Theory to Existential Counselling

The main attempt in existential counselling is to help individuals to open up their world so that they can find their place in the world. By accomplishing this goal, clients can gain the capability to manage their difficult situations during their lifetime. In fact, awareness of their abilities and limitations guides them to find their position in the world. Moreover, unlike other theories that assume changes in patterns of behaviours and interaction lead to internal experiences, existentialism emphasizes on concrete matters in relation to human being in existential counselling and points out that changes in patterns of behaviours and interactions come from internal experience and discovery of authentic existence (Haldane & McCluskey, 1982). From an existential approach, aspects such as uniqueness, freedom, and unpredictability are important qualities of human beings; therefore, existential psychology is involved in introspection. Besides, the subject of existential psychotherapy is human being's existence and his experience of life rather than a historical understanding of human being (Haldane & McCluskey, 1982).

4. Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, there is a variety of therapeutic potentials in existential thought. Indeed, philosophy, and specifically existentialism, has engaged the concepts such as meaning of life, authenticity, trust to oneself, responsibility, choice and etc. that can hardly be failed to utilize by those experts who are involved in treatment psychologically. However, each existential psychotherapist has utilized some of the aforementioned concepts and seems to ignore the rest. Cooper (2003) argues that this is because, in the first decades of the twentieth century, existential approaches to therapy have emerged independently in several parts of Western Europe and the United States. In addition, diverse interpretations of existentialism's difficult concepts have been regarded as second reason for this ignorance. Undeniably, there are varieties of therapeutic practices in existential attitude. Yalom (1980), for instance, persuades clients that death, freedom, isolation and meaningless are unavoidable existential conditions of human beings and no body can ignore them. Frankl (1984), as an existential psychotherapist, has focused on freedom of choice and responsibility towards others. In contrast, Van Deurzen (2002a) explores four dimensions of the world: the physical, personal, social and spiritual dimensions.

Therefore, there is a gap in the present literature which shows that combined therapeutic practice of these elements in order to apply for comprehensive counselling process is inexistence. As a result, further studies needs to be done on combining the aforementioned elements as an existential approach to Counselling.

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