



The Essentials of Existential Psychoanalysis

by Neil Soggie

Abstract

The purpose of this inquiry was to provide a guide for discussing the essential requirements for existential therapy, in particular within the initial phase. From the responses of a sample of professional therapists, three essential themes have been identified: convenience (that is, having a script that will allow the therapist to reach a rapid understanding of the nature of the client's existential being), mythic familiarity, and an emphasis upon imaginal techniques.

Meaninglessness is essentially endless pointlessness, and meaningfulness is therefore the opposite. Activity, and even long, drawn out and repetitive activity, has a meaning if it has some significant culmination, some more or less lasting end that can be considered to have been the direction and purpose of the activity. ... [T]his life of the world [however] presents itself to our eyes as a vast machine, feeding on itself, running on and on forever to nothing. ... then one realizes that there is no point at all, that it really culminates in nothing, that each of these cycles, so filled with toil, is to be followed only by more of the same.

(Taylor, 1981)

Introduction

The question to be explored in this paper is “What is important for doing existential therapy?” Such a question may seem simplistic, but it addresses what is of the essence in defining the distinctive nature of practice in the professional field, and which as such must constantly be reviewed and refined in a collegial setting. The insights gleaned from this study will thus hopefully prompt discussion and further professional understanding of what is essential within the initial phase of existential psychotherapy.

Method

The qualitative nature of this study is compatible with the aim of providing insight into what are perceived as the essential elements of existentially important psychotherapy. In order to gain this *soft* information, a specific sampling technique clearly came to the fore. The logic of purposive sampling was apparent, as this investigation requires the judgment of experts within the field. By virtue of the fact that certain therapists engage in existential aspects within therapy, it is clear that their knowledge will be especially informative to this investigation.

In order to operationally define a professional existential therapist, this study relied upon the rosters of professional associations. Professional existential therapists were identified as the practitioners on the rosters of the *Society for Existential Analysis (2003)* or the *Association for Humanistic Psychology (2002)*. However, not all members on these lists were selected for contact.

The reason some members were not selected for contact was in an effort to avoid a *Regent's College (London)* bias (Regent's College being the researcher's alma mater). Given the emphasis of this research on the human factor and the intimate first-hand knowledge of professional practitioners, it was important for the researcher to manage possible biases. While this does not, of course, mean that all biases will have been controlled for, it was clearly necessary to attempt to avoid a weighted slant towards a specific school of thought. Therefore, since the researcher was already associated with Regent's College of London, any additional Regent's College influence may have created an undue philosophical bias. Practitioners who were listed in the directories referred to as having a professional or academic association with Regent's College of London were thus identified and eliminated as participants in the proposed study.

Another attempt to manage bias was through the use of a general letter posing an open-ended prompt question. Through the use of this technique, the investigatory question could be asked without creating a directional bias in the responses. In essence, the letter introduced the researcher and asked for an open response to the issue presented:

Please write ... about your general construct of existential psychotherapy and highlight what information you find is most important to glean during the first initial interviews in order to facilitate therapy. Please also mention information that you desire to have but do not have the ability to collect during the initial interviews with the client.

This letter was sent via e-mail to all the remaining professional therapists on the rosters. This method brings up a secondary aspect of the sampling technique. For while the goal was to have a purposive sample, it was in many ways accidental, as some of the therapists' e-mail addresses were inactive. One could thus argue that, in a true scientific sense, the sampling frame for this qualitative approach was a combination of purposive/convenience sampling.

Results

Of the 64 e-mails that successfully made it through to their destination (that is, they were not returned due to inactive addresses), 8 therapists responded. This, of course, raises the question of response bias within the research. However, given the previous attempts at bias management, the researcher considered that this was not a problematic issue and that the response rate was adequate for qualitative analysis of the data elicited. The thematic analysis of the opinions of the respondents follows.

The respondents identified three areas of interest/concern in respect of the issue of therapy and initial interviews. The first and clearest issue was the felt need for a quick way to get a sense of the client's existential structure (in whatever form it may take). That is to say, there was a pervading expression of not having adequate time within the early part of therapy to develop a good sense of the client's existential issues. It is, of course, possible that this is indicative of a response bias and the feeling that responding to the research question was taking away their professional time. Indeed, one therapist did in fact express this concern. However, it is also noteworthy that this was the most prevalent expression, and it must therefore be considered significant.

The second most common theme was that of understanding ethnic heritage and cultural stories. In essence, there was a felt need to be able to rapidly identify the key stories that are unique to a particular individual's setting. For one of the therapists, this was of particularly strong concern. It was emphasized that a therapist should clearly specialise in the cultural stories of a particular population set, in order to expedite incorporating the power of the cultural stories into therapy. It is, therefore, clear that understanding humanity's mythopoetic qualities (that is, the story-creating core of people) is central to the professional experience of existential therapy.

The final theme that emerged from the responses was not in relation to discovering anything about the client, as in the need for brief and effective psychometric tools or discovering the key cultural stories. Rather, the professional thematic emphasis was on the therapeutic power of imagery and imaginal techniques. The general perception was that clients seem to be more effectively helped by imaginative techniques rather than by traditional psychoanalytic interviews. Indeed, the emphatic view of one therapist was that *regardless of their circumstances* (Reznick, 2003) employing innate imaginative healing was important for all clients.

Conclusion

The purpose of this inquiry into *soft* data was to provide a guide for discussing the essentials for existential therapy. From the responses of a sample of therapists, three essential themes have emerged: convenience (that is, having a script that will allow the therapist to quickly understand the nature of the client's existential being), mythic familiarity, and an emphasis upon imaginal techniques. In order to further clarify some of these issues, we will briefly refer to relevant literature within the field.

As Emmy Van Deurzen (2001) notes, a key to understanding a client is having a sense of how he or she is emerging into life. That is to say - is the client actively emerging into a new and adaptive self, or is the client engaged and active in the labour of everyday existence and identity, or has the client disintegrated into a type of existential despair and apathy?

In addition, Van Deurzen (2001) highlights the need for the self-world interaction in the existential processing of the self. Therefore it is logical that the therapist should seek to learn something of the client's sense of selfhood and its system of dealing with public as well as personal relationships. Obviously, in therapy there should also be concern about the negative aspects of these relationships, and

so an understanding of the client's repertoire of conflict management strategies would be important.

Finally, as a basic standard in all therapeutic settings, there should be an opportunity to do, at least on a cursory level, a screening for psychiatric/neurological issues and a risk assessment. This is, of course, a basic standard that should be undertaken by any psychotherapist in order to ensure that the client is best served by the *talking cure* as opposed to a medical intervention.

The conclusion of this research is that, within the first session with the client, there must be an opportunity to make the client feel at ease with the therapist, and for the therapist to do a screening for basic psychiatric issues. In addition, the therapist must, in a very efficient manner, learn about the client's cultural myths. Finally, through employment of the power of imaginal techniques, the therapist should gain insight into the client's existential orientation/structure and the basics of his or her self/world relationship. In conclusion, this whole process should leave the therapist with a basis for making a cursory risk assessment and deciding on possible psychiatric referrals. Of course, it must also be a non-invasive, calm initial interview that facilitates a positive client-centred tone that will facilitate future sessions. The next step for every reader in the professional field is now to sit down and evaluate his/her own practice to ensure that these existential essentials are met.

About the Author

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