ABSTRACT

The debate over the origin, present status, and the future of existential psychotherapy have moved at glacier speed while the communication patterns of much of the world have changed dramatically. Confusion over such significant matters as to what type of training a therapist should receive, the moral and societal obligation and component of therapy, and the value of Freud’s contributions remain ubiquitous and enervating. Before these issues can be effectively dealt with, the seminal issue of whether human beings are truly free or instead are determined by their experiences must be honestly resolved, or at the very least honestly and fearlessly addressed and debated. Perhaps other characteristics such as tolerance, flexibility, perseverance, and determination, other than or along with experience, may be more fruitful to consider “within the therapeutic milieu”. Coincidently, it may be the Internet is a metaphor for choice, symbolizing the ability to make informed choices through access to knowledge and information we could never have dreamed of. Freedom may be the degree to which choices are informed, instead of a static construct based on experience. Instead of paying attention to resolving that dichotomy, determinism vs. freedom of choice, we have a novel or new freedom that is continually expanding with the growth of available information.

Introduction

It is important and it is time for the state of existential psychology and psychiatry to be reviewed and critiqued honestly and with deference, but also severely and spontaneously. It is also time for some lively banter, with an open and trenchant dialogue, instead of a guarded, albeit insightful, sensitive, profound, and scholarly proffer. This is not meant to be a thorough treatise, but hopefully will offer a valuable reaction to the field. It is only through a lively, open exchange can a study or a therapy of human beings truly grow.

BACKGROUND

In the seminal work, Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology, May (1958) delineated a complex relationship between psychoanalysis and existential analysis. He concluded that sometimes this connection was very close, as in its etiology. That is, they are both seen as reactions to societal and individual fragmentation (p. 20). Other times the association is intertwined and juxtaposed, as in the consideration of experience, reason, and technique. And in still other ways the two views are quite disparate, as in their respective considerations of the human being. In Binswanger’s view, existential analysis tends to “not only the ethereal world of wishes and phantasies and its substructure, the
tomb-world of desires, but also the authentic I-myself and the eternal We, existence, and love, the being-able and being-allowed, and thus the being in truth, beauty, and kindness” (Binswanger, 1958, pp. 327-328). Freud, on the other hand, developed his image of the human being from the neuroses. “But since even a neurotic is not only a neurotic, and man in general is not only one compelled, we deal here with a one-sided distortion of the human image in the frame of a scientific theory of man” (Binswanger, 1958 p. 329).

The essence of the relationship between psychoanalysis and existential analysis is at the center of this discussion because it is at the genesis of the modern unresolved struggle implicating the human being as determined or truly free (and thus the value of experience). This is a struggle that seems to permeate and infect the essence of every therapeutic encounter.

One person who tried to address and confront this seminal question of “experience” was R.D. Laing. Ernesto Spinelli (1989) summarized Laing’s contribution (e.g. 1967, The Politics of Experience, and 1982, The Voice of Experience) as “highly original and forceful writings which increasingly identified him as a particularly insightful and innovative spokesperson for a growing number of British psychiatrists who, in their adoption of a phenomenological approach to their profession, became vociferous opponents of the prevailing ethos of physical methods of treatment of severe mental disturbances “ (p.136). Spinelli further interjects that critics of Laing have accused him of glorifying severe disturbances such as schizophrenia and of elevating the often bleak and painful behaviors of these individuals into acts of bravery or mysti-

cal insight. Spinelli concluded that this is a serious misreading of Laing, possibly resulting from his public statements to the general media designed to stir things up in medical circles. Although Laing must be given credit for “trying to stir things up on the continent”, his rhetorical gifts made possible his brilliant and popular books and essays which served to challenge the very nature and fiber of mental “illness”. He was an iconoclast whose works and beliefs must be a catalyst for change. It must be remembered that it is his contrast with Freudian thought that is so notable, and not the similarities. Greening (1995) with great reverence, and I believe relevance, composed:

**FOR RONNIE LAING**

Who’s mad and who’s sane,  
and who decides?  
If you have to ask,  
don’t ask out loud,  
or you could end up  
on the wrong side of the keys,  
knife, chemicals, or electricity.  
What was a nice Scotch doctor  
doing in a world like this?  
Rattling paradigms, that’s what,  
and drinking more than he should.  
His time is up,  
and the psychiatric pub  
is quieter now.  
Once he asked,  
“Where in the world  
are lunatics allowed to bathe  
naked in the moonlight?”  
At last he has found the place,  
but he’s probably splashing  
more than God allows. (Greening, 1995)

Although Laing valiantly battled the conven-

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Spinelli, from Europe, rather contentiously compared humanistic psychology with the phenomenological approach and concluded that “much of humanistic psychology reflected a North American attitude, which in its emphasis on technique, can be summarized; “If it works, do it.” Spinelli went on to assert that “Phenomenological Psychology, on the other hand, firmly rooted in Continental European philosophy, takes a much more guarded stance which de-emphasizes technique and explores the wider implications of ideology” (1989 p. 159). Yalom (1980), even labeled humanistic psychology as existential psychology’s flashy American cousin with its emphasis on freedom and choice. I must inquire; is the maxim, “If it works do it,” necessarily wrong? Or is it an example of resourceful ingenuity, which nevertheless must still be buttressed with a grounded philosophy and ideology? The inquiry into the approaches of the different continents may be exciting and interesting, but it doesn’t answer the question “Are human beings actually free or are they determined?” and again “What is the value of experience?” The dispute merely surreptitiously digresses from these fundamental questions whose answers seems essential to successful therapeutic perspective and intervention.

Contemporary works may address more concrete aspects of this experience dilemma, but still sidestep the fundamental issue of its importance. Groth (2000) delves into the status of existential psychotherapy and concluded that “Given the bureaucratic and legal constraints that govern the practice of psychotherapy (in the US) we cannot consider ourselves to be siblings of our non-American
counterparts, but rather only cousins, and distant ones at that, since while our work may parallel that of our cousins abroad, its status rests on entirely different grounds. Our situation is radically different from theirs.” (p. 8). Groth goes on to contrast the difference in the practice of psychotherapy in the United States with the practice abroad. These differences include severe restraints by legal definitions, licensing, certification, payment of fees, and dealing with insurance companies. He contends that because of these factors there were very few practicing existential psychologists in the United States and in the future there may be none. “The reality is that those of us who believe in the freedom and autonomy of the individual who seeks psychotherapy will soon have to work outside of the context of organized clinical psychology if we wish to retain our autonomy as existential psychotherapists.” (p. 9). Groth ponders that “perhaps it will take a courageous declaration of independence from the health care professions to accomplish this. (p. 11). He concluded “What we do has nothing to do with what health care providers do. We must be willing to say that and to explain ourselves to the public. It is my conviction that the current revival of existential analysis will do just that” (p. 11).

In addition to enumerating the problems of practicing existential psychotherapy in the United States today, Groth also detailed when and in what types of situations existential psychotherapy can be most effective. These situations include issues concerning the anticipatory nature of existing and the recognition of the spiritual dimension of existence, and the particular suitability of existential psychotherapy for the so-called personality disorders.

Groth admitted that we do not know what the characteristics of a good psychotherapist are, but still asserts that the most important elements of any training program for existential psychotherapy must be one’s own experience of psychotherapy (p. 24). I wonder if this is a notion merely borrowed from the psychoanalytic school. In addition although critical of Freud, he nevertheless credits him for his “revolutionary treatment” (p. 16), his thoughts on teaching, leading, and healing, and what is the best preparation for doing psychotherapy (a life of wide reading) (p. 23).

Farber (2001) decried Freudianism and contended that Freudianism, “in its classical form and in its modern variants has constrained the freedom of human beings to transcend the limits of an essentially sub-human mode of existence, and thus constitutes to this day a terrible blight on human life and on the human quest for happiness” (p. 107). He further condemned Freudianism by summarizing the effects of psychoanalysis stating “the mind reels when one imagines the millions of people who accepted these narratives as objective truth, and thus lived under the spell of a curse that made them feel like defective, inadequate human beings, stultified their ability to give and receive love, and transformed their lives into hell on earth.” (p. 126).

Interestingly and, I believe ironically, the views of Farber and Groth on the effectiveness of psychotherapy are somewhat similar (Groth cites a 9% figure as the success rate (p. 24)), but their relative views of proper training and relative worth of psychotherapy appear to be radically different. Whereas Groth
promoted analysis and personal psychotherapy, Farber rejected the notion that a trained therapist was more helpful than basically any person with a comparable social status and no training, and referred to psychotherapy as “in large part a con job”. (p. 127). Farber even thought that the stultifying process of undergoing psychotherapy would only hamper one’s ability to help a fellow human being. After reviewing data collected by life span developmental researchers, Farber considered major determinants of adult pathology and averred that life span development is “idiosyncratic and unpredictable”, (p. 127), and claimed significant change in one’s life course may occur at any time. (My life experiences and knowledge can only concur with this declaration). He concluded, “thus the intractability that neo-Freudians find among the severely mentally ill is an artifact of their own practices, a self-fulfilling prophecy” (p.123).

Numerous authors have speculated a variety of constructs to take the place of instincts or experience as the defining variable for both effective therapeutic encounter and an efficacious understanding of the human psyche. Elkins (1995) contended the “soul” was the principal construct in successful psychotherapy. King and Citrenbaum (1993) argued that the “trance” in existential hypnotherapy traverses the gap between existential analysis and psychoanalysis. We must ask, are the soul and/or the trance insignificant and meaningless variables or can they supplant the concept of experience in psychotherapy? If nothing else are they the essence of Binswanger’s ethereal world of wishes and fantasies”?

Another proposed bridge between existential and psychoanalysis is self-psychology.

Tobin (2001) almost apologetically asserted that self-psychologists should create “their own diagnostic system, one not based on the assumptions of Freudian theory” (p. 55). Should we conclude that that concepts of diagnosis, experience, and development are all a bunch of tripe? If these concepts are worthless should existential psychotherapy move on without them? I tend to think so!

**Recommendations**

I submit an actual paradigm shift here. Maybe the actual essence of the therapy hour has changed. Ofman asked “Now what does the therapist need to bring to the table? ” He (1976) considered the questions; “What does the therapist have, what is he paid for, what is his merchandise?” He allowed “in the main, he is paid for what he, himself has gone through in his quest for authenticity, and for his willingness to manifest presence to be there: for his willingness to unmask himself and thus help the person sitting before him” . (p. 143). But this description of therapy is merely an analysis of one’s (really the totality of both the therapists and the client’s) “project”, a concept very closely akin to that of experience and is considered at the expense of more important parameters. I ponder maybe the actual “Table” has changed.

It is time to speak out and affirm that the therapist as an interested human being is not quite enough. I do not mean to suggest that this will be an easy proposition. To transcend a paradigm, emphasizing experience, that one is born into and extensively educated about will not be easy, but the debate about the origin, present, and future of existential psychotherapy seems to have made little progress.
in 40 or so years. Its debate can not seem to transcend its own rhetoric, however beautiful that rhetoric might be.

This core issue of the value of experience is being relegated to second place at best. While both Freudian analysis and Existential Psychotherapy point towards the past and one’s personal history as determinants of who one is, it is being replaced right before our very eyes with the Internet. Just google the word “psychotherapy”. One million four hundred fifty thousand references or links appear. It is also interesting to note the almost prevailing presence of online psychotherapy and “coaching” among these links. Fairly recently the phenomenon of coaching has emerged, seemingly as a response to the licensing constraints that were referred to earlier in this paper. Perhaps successful psychotherapy primarily involves competent and proficient navigating of the Internet, that is sorting out a plethora of information. LeGautt commented that “The myth is not that there is too much information- there is. The myth is that there is too much good information; that interaction, good or not, has somehow become hazardous to one’s health. Good information is still a rarity, and rarer still is the intellect that can polish it and turn it into knowledge (p.180). Successful discriminating characteristics such as perseverance, determination, a thirst for knowledge, and a desire to hone one’s critical thinking emerge as more important than personal experience. It may be the Internet is a metaphor for choice, symbolizing the ability to make informed choices through access to knowledge and information we could never have dreamed of. Freedom may be the degree to which choices are informed, instead of a static construct based on experience. Instead of paying attention to resolving that dichotomy, determinism vs. freedom of choice, we have a novel or new freedom that is continually expanding with the growth of available information.

Smith (1994) wondered whether humanistic psychology may be falling apart but thinks that it will “resist dismemberment” (p. 115). I am not as optimistic as he was. The core issue over the value of experience must be addressed and then abandoned for confusion to subside and for existential psychology to move on. Only then can the right questions be asked honestly, and fertile and perspicacious answers be found. It is time to heed the call for action, change, and freedom! It may be time to put the notion of experience into the background, maybe even relative obscurity.
REFERENCES


