Objectives of Existential Psychology and Existential Psychotherapy: Answering Paul Wong’s Editorial

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I consider it a great fortune for all those working within the field of existential psychology and psychotherapy to have such an initiative as the one of Paul Wong and his collaborators. It really seems to provide us with a new impulse in theory, research and practice and, above all, it marks a step in collecting and concentrating forces, ideas and interests on a global level. Maybe this will one day turn out to be another step toward a more unified, cooperative, interrelated, honestly working and personally encountering world. I contribute wholeheartedly to this endeavour and hope that we can invite others to join as well.

In his introduction to – let us assumingly call it – this new era of existential psychology, Paul Wong lists the most important tasks of existential psychology (although not so much those of existential psychotherapy). I completely agree with the importance both of a positive philosophy behind an effective existential psychology and with a practical orientation of its theory. The linkage of existential psychology to practice – like an adequate set of psychotherapies and preventions – is, in my opinion, inherent to an existential psychology which forms the theoretical framework for that practice.

I would like to respond briefly to Paul Wong’s appealing introduction in my function as President of the International Society for Existential Analytical Psychotherapy (ISEAP). First of all I would like to reflect on the specific tasks of existential psychology; then, try to find a broadest possible definition of existential psychotherapy; thirdly, formulate a structure of possible existential themes and questions, and finally, give a remark on the methods of investigation.

1.) The specific task of existential psychology (EP)

It seems important to me that this “psychology of human existence” is one for “real people in concrete situations” (Wong, 2004, p. 1). It must therefore be applicable in everyday life as well as in extreme life situations (Grenzsituationen – K. Jaspers). This aptitude derives from its reference to the personal (human) potentialities (like attitudes, decisions, responsibility, etc.) and underlying existential structures (cf. below). EP’s main focus should be on helping people to a fulfilling and rewarding personal existence.

This means that the application of EP should be limited to the reflection on concrete situations of concrete persons which, according to Viktor Frankl, for example, is seen as the basis for existential meaning and existential thinking. Only the individual is capable of decisions and responsibility. The change of complex structures like families, groups, systems, and nations starts with the activation of the individual’s freedom, authenticity and responsibility. The survival of humanity may be a result, but not a direct intention of the endeavours of EP. The broader the duty, the less graspable it is (K. Jaspers). It would also contradict the phenomenological attitude of EP if we tried to develop general rules of behaviour for humankind, politicians etc. And even if we had the ability to act on such a global level, we should be loathe to use it, and focus instead
on the personal level of conviction and attitudes. Our goal is not to better the world or humankind but to free the individual and make him/her aware of possible choices. How can define the “good and evil” for others? It seems to me that it would be helpful focus to restrict our intentions from the beginning to this level, and to be open to possible, fruitful results for larger groups. EP refers to a high degree to values and has therefore an inherent danger of ideology, moralization and secular religion. The intention of changing others brings along the danger of imposition.

I am also in complete agreement that we should not limit our thinking to the “long shadows” of the philosophers of the last century and to develop our “own identity”, which is probably a new one with a “redefinition of EP”. But this does not necessarily imply a break with history or require us “to step out” of it. It may also be a prolongation of the existing, a recombination, a new accentuation in the light of the new questions and challenges of our time. Let us see how it comes and what we need! I’m sure that this was likely Pauls’ intended meaning.

2. Attempt to define Existential Psychotherapy (EPT)

Paul’s introduction, in my opinion, refers mainly to EP, but little is said about EPT. We also need to attempt a definition for EPT.

The most common basis for all EP and EPT is the human capability for decision-making and in consequence for taking responsibility.

The most common basis for existential counselling is the work with explication and arguments to achieve insights, decisions, attitudes, convictions (e.g. Frankl 1982).

The most common basis for EPT is an introduction to an accompanied process of growth and/or change in an individual or in a group of individuals on the basis of their own experience. The common hub may therefore lie in the individual’s lived and affected experience (Erleben).

An attempt of a practical definition on this basis could be: EPT is a psychotherapeutic method to help people to come to live with inner consent to their own actions.

3. The fundamental existential questions

Paul gave a challenging sample of questions for EP and EPT dividing them into four groups: essence of existence (with its moral scale); anthropology (“true self”); conditions of human existence (integration of duality); influential power on the conditions.

If we look for a system to cluster possible questions for EP and EPT it might be important to have one which includes a consistent view on the “human being interrelated” and simultaneously being based on possible structures of existence. I would therefore like to make a proposition for a systematic arrangement of the existential questions around the probably most fundamental four dimensions of existence (e.g. Längle 2004):

3.1 The relation to the physical world with its conditions for physical overcoming. It is based, for example, on struggling for place, power, money, influence; corporality, protection; the dealing with it has spiritual underpinnings in a sense of being ‘held’, trust, hope, courage, faith, fundamental trust.

3.2 The relation to one’s own life with its dimension of relationship to others and relation to oneself. This point is based on affect, mood, emotions, drives and values; of dealing with time, transitoriness; the finding of closeness, embrace, friendship, love, inner movement, grief, attitude toward life.
3.3 The relation to the self as a unique and autonomous person which can only be developed in the interchange with other persons. It claims for attention, encounter and respect; for justice and justification, autonomy, responsibility, morality, ethics, remorse and forgiveness; for appreciation of oneself and others and for the development of self-esteem which is linked to authenticity.

3.4 The relation to the greater contexts we live in and which form our future, providing us with values to work on, to develop, because we identify with and want to stand within their horizon. This is a more systemic aspect of existence, developmental and active at the same time. In this greater interrelation we find the meanings in our life and face absurdity.

The loss of one or more of these fundamental dimensions with their manifold manifestations leads to a psychologically protective reflex, with the sole aim of overcoming the situation. This in turn gives rise to different types of aggression and reactions most common in sufferings by others and by oneself.

Most of Paul’s questions can be matched easily to these four dimensions. The main difference is that these structural questions do not yield concrete content as answers but look for an approach to find answers. A question like Paul’s “What is the meaning of life in light of these negative givens?” turns to: “How can we find meaning…”.

Let me give some examples of typical questions just to give an impression:

To 3.1 Relation to the world: Can I/we live under the actual political, economical, health etc. situation? What makes existence difficult, what allows it, what endorses it? Which conditions could be changed for the better by myself, what do I/we need for a change etc.? Where can we find protection? How can we reduce our hate etc.? In what and whom can I place my/our trust? How well do we perceive reality and structures that hold/secure us in it? – The whole domain of anxiety and courage emerges naturally here.

To 3.2 Relation to life: How do I/we feel our being here? What gives us joy, what deepens our emotions? What can I/we do to have close relationships? Do I/we maintain closeness and do I/we allow closeness to others? Under which conditions? Do I/we take time for valuable things? Is this real life what I live? How can I/we discern “real life”? How can we find values? Do I/we love life? – This domain of existence includes human affect, moods and its disorders (e.g. depression).

To 3.3 Relation to one’s autonomous self: What gives me/us identity? What gives us the right to be ourselves and how can we relate with others? How can we (better) consider our boundaries? For what do I appreciate myself, yourself? How do I get rid of solitude, shame? Do I have open access to my intimacy, my intimate feelings? How can I be more identical with myself, be more authentic? Why is it even important to be authentic? What are the foundations of self-esteem? – Histrionic disorders and most personality disorders emerge from this domain of existence.

To 3.4 Relation to greater contexts: Where do I/we feel needed in our surrounding world? What change claims this specific situation? What should be realized in my life? For what reason or purpose am I on this earth? Where and with whom should do I connect and find myself? What do I see as the meaning of this situation – of my life? – The issues of suicide and dependence is strongly connected to this dimension.

All these dimensions (like security; emotionality; morality, authenticity, limitations; meanings) should be treated...
theoretically by EP and practically by EP and EPT under the viewpoint of conditions for their being, development and improvement and in dialogue with existential philosophy, pedagogy, sociology, theology, medicine and other fields of psychology etc.

4. Methodological remark
The aim of EP and EPT, is to reach the individuals in the midst of their Lebenswelt, calls for a specific method. The only one suitable for that purpose is the one which enables one to encounter the person and renders visible his/her essence. The essence of a human being cannot be measured; but it can be “brought into light” (“erhellen”). No system, no interpretation does justice to the autonomy and Eigen-value (Eigenwert) of the person; it deserves high respect.

With such a necessarily strong focus on the phenomenological and qualitative research methods, the question concerning the importance of quantitative methods naturally arises. I see in them as a supplementary measure on another level of analysis, and naturally secondary to than the essential, phenomenological level of analysis. The object of its consideration lies with the effects and numerical outcomes within personal existence. This may nevertheless be helpful for certain questions with a clear restriction of its interpretation.

I join this new community with enthusiasm hoping that this journal will be a platform for a fruitful and inspiring exchange which will help to promote this very fine approach.

References