The Importance of a Systematically Existential Approach: Response to Paul T. P. Wong’s Editorial

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Overall, I agree enthusiastically with Paul Wong’s (2004) editorial concerning existential psychology and the mission of the International Journal of Existential Psychology and Psychotherapy. His editorial is itself compassionate, optimistic, forgiving, and dedicated. I am thankful for this wonderful directive. If the Journal can make progress toward the goals he outlines, that would really be something grand. Let us all try to bring this about.

One minor concern I have is that he should be careful not to get mired in the opposites, or contradictions of human life, such as love and hate, anxiety and courage, viciousness and forgiveness. Often times, the most constructive and developmentally enhancing way is in between the opposites, rather than the one extreme that seems more appropriate or justifiable than the other. For example, when we are hurt by someone, it is most constructive to try to resolve the underlying conflict between us by discussing both their and our contributions, rather than by either striking out in anger (however assertive this may seem) or giving blanket forgiveness (however magnanimous this may seem).

Another minor concern is that Paul Wong seems to go too far in calling for us to distance ourselves from the philosophers who espoused existentialism. I agree that we should not get bogged down in their (or anyone else’s) positions. Ours is a more empirical, practical approach, and that may well carry us beyond the philosophical beginnings. But, we should also recognize two things. One is that the existential philosophers had a great deal of understanding of human functioning, and gave us valuable conceptualizations of both inauthenticity and authenticity, and how to reach the latter. The other is that these conceptualizations have been indispensable to us primarily because Western psychology and psychiatry have been influenced by wholly different (even incompatible) philosophical and conceptual traditions. With the prevalence of behaviouristic and psychoanalytic emphases in the Western world, it was valuable for us to turn to the existential philosophers for guidance. And, their emphases may still be useful as a conceptual guide to our empirical and practical activities. We need to preserve and deepen our emphasis on how people find meaning in their lives by the pattern of decisions they make, rather than through how they are shaped by others or their biological givens.

Reference