Empirical Research and Meaning:

Stefan E. Schulenberg

I was pleased to read Wong’s (2004) editorial, “Existential Psychology for the 21st Century.” He poses challenging and important questions that existential psychology and psychotherapy should be poised to address. In response, there are several comments that I would like to make.

1) Many individual schools of thought have contributed greatly to the literature, and although these schools may emphasize different aspects of the existential paradigm, we should not lose sight of their importance. Synthesizing the literature from the various schools of thought is paramount to more effectively determining the scientific basis of existential psychology and psychotherapy. Differences among these various schools are potentially noteworthy as they may spark debate critical to advancing the empirical foundations of the field.

2) There are many areas where the science of existential psychology and psychotherapy, particularly the concept of meaning, has yet to be fully applied. In my own work (see Schulenberg, 2003) this has led to examining the intersection of meaning and computer technology, reporting on the importance of meaning in the lives of youths with severe behavioural and/or developmental problems, probing the relationship between meaning and giftedness, and investigating meaning’s place in clinical/disaster psychology.

3) As described in Schulenberg (2003), meaning offers one means of understanding maladaptive behavior. Some people may engage in maladaptive behavior to derive a sense of purpose. For instance, this is a clinical issue in cases where adolescents sexually abuse people to feel “loved” or “respected.” This was not an uncommon case formulation in my clinical experiences working with male youths with mental retardation/developmental disabilities and sexual behaviour problems. Existential psychology and psychotherapy is applicable in such cases, particularly through emphasis on responsibility taking and adaptive choice making.

4) We need to learn more about the scientific relevance and efficiency of the various applications of existential psychology and psychotherapy, not only on an individual therapeutic scale, but on a larger societal level as well. Particular emphasis should be paid to rigorous empirical methodology, to include both qualitative and quantitative methods (as has been suggested by others in the literature), and studying important existential concepts from a diversity/multicultural perspective. The *International Journal of Existential Psychology and Psychotherapy* has the scope, and therefore the potential, to promote the empirical study of important existential issues.

References