

Existential Theory applied to Conrad in Ordinary People

Lucy Bartnick

Mental Health Counseling, AGSC

GCN 502 Theories and Foundations

Professor George Ramos

February 28th, 2023

-

Existential Therapy Overview

Existential psychotherapy evolved, in part, out of a reaction to Freud's deterministic stance on human behavior. That is, a number of leading philosophers started to believe that an individual always has the freedom to choose in a given situation, even if that choice is only in a person's attitude of how to accept their given set of circumstances. Said another way, an individual does not have to be the victim of their childhood upbringing, but rather, they have a choice in how they want to be in the world. (Corey, 2020).

At its core, the fundamental principles of the existential philosophy include "(1) the capacity for self-awareness; (2) freedom and responsibility; (3) creating one's identity and establishing meaningful relationships with others; (4) the search for meaning, purpose, values, and goals; (5) anxiety as a condition of living; and (6) awareness of death and non-being" (Corey, 2020, p. 138).

The real-world experience of loneliness, as well as being thwarted in the search for life's purpose or in establishing loving relationships, is often the driving force of why people come into therapy. Existential counselors do not operate using a standard set of techniques, but rather, help their clients see that their life may be structured inauthentically around people-pleasing, intellectualizing, or other limiting behavior patterns. Once the client sees that they do not have to be the victim of external forces or of letting others choose for them, they can start to direct their energies in ways that better align with their goals.

Application

Two key goals of therapy that Schneider and Krug (2010) identified are to one, help clients identify ways in which they block themselves from fully engaging in their interactions with others, and two, to challenge clients to become accountable for creating meaning in their lives. Similarly, Deurzen (2012) stressed that therapists form a bond with their clients and get them to think for themselves.

The first phase of counseling typically consists of clarifying the assumptions the client has about the world. In the middle phase of therapy, the client starts to consider what kind of life would be fulfilling, as well as a set of values to live by. In the third and final phase, the counselor and client work together to address ways to implement these goals and values in concrete ways.

Techniques

One of the reasons for the universal appeal of existential therapy is that there are limited prescribed techniques, as the approach is more focused on the humanistic side, and the interaction between counselor and therapist. There is a broad framework from which to work, making existential therapy very adaptable to the particular dynamic of the therapeutic relationship.

That said, one of the questions that a therapist can ask as a way of getting the client to take ownership over their circumstances is, “Although you have lived in a certain pattern, now that you recognize the price of some of your ways, are you willing to consider creating new patterns?” (Corey, 2020).

Benefits

Because existential therapy focuses on some of the pervasive concerns in modern times, such as facing death, finding a purpose in one's life, and establishing healthy boundaries in loving relationships, it seems an approach that seems well-suited to providing long-range support to clients.

Another key benefit to this approach is that it gets the client to gradually see how their own behaviors contribute to the situation in which they find themselves. By helping the client identify their values, the client can start to take ownership over how they behave with others, establish projects and purpose for themselves, and lead a more fulfilling life.

References

Redford, R. (1980), *Ordinary People*. Wildwood Enterprises Inc.

Corey G., (2020). *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, (10th ed.). Cengage Learning