

## Existential Social Work

Donald F. Krill

**Abstract:** *The existential impact upon social work began in the 1960's with the emphasis upon freedom, responsibility and a sense of the absurd. It affirmed human potential while faulting the deterministic thinking that was popular with psychological theorists at that time. It was open to the prospects of spirituality, but was less than optimistic concerning great progress among social institutions. It was a forerunner to the strengths-based social work programs of our present day.*

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Existential Social Work had its modest entry into social work in the 60s and 70s. Sixteen articles were published by seven different social workers in the late 70s. Three of these authors also published books on the same topic. In his book *Social Treatment*, James K. Whittaker (1974) declared Existential Social Work as one of the three major theories for social work practice. By 1975 Francis Turner included it as one of fourteen practice approaches in his book *Social Work Treatment* (1974). Even earlier, in the 50s, existential ideas had surfaced in the Pennsylvania School of Social Work wherein the functional approach stemming from the work of Otto Rank. In his award-winning book, *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker (1973) contrasted Freud with Rank and linked the latter with existential thought.

Contrasting social work with the fields of psychiatry and psychology, it would seem that philosophical ideas tend to elude the interest of many social workers who appear more practice minded, politically motivated, or both. While social workers embraced social systems thinking early on, they seemed hesitant to expand the systems construct to its cosmological or quantum theory dimensions. Perhaps social work's socialistic leaning from the 30s and 40s raised a cautionary ambivalence to spirituality and philosophy.

In psychiatry there were well known existential advocates such as Viktor Frankl, Rollo May, Ludwig Binswanger, Medard Boss and Thomas Hora. Two outstanding psychologist existentialists were William Offinan and Irvin Yalom. *The Journal of Existential Psychiatry* and the *Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry* both appeared in the mid-60s.

Nevertheless, social work did eventually adopt the major existential themes in the form of varied strength-based therapies. A social work article, "Existential psychotherapy and the problem of anomie," identified these five existential principles: Aiding the process of disillusionment; finding meaning in suffering; freedom of choice; affirming the necessity of dialogue; and, the way of commitment (Krill, 1969). In 1989, psychiatrist Irvin Yalom emphasized the existential themes of

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death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness in his book *Existential Psychotherapy* (Yalom, 1989).

The existential model was a part of the humanistic psychology movement, in contrast to the psychodynamic and behavioral schools. The emphasis in the psychodynamic school was upon diagnostics and theory. With the behaviorists, the emphasis was upon research and techniques. The humanistic group, sometimes called "the third force," prized the therapeutic relationship above all, emphasizing transparency, authenticity and spontaneity.

Important shifts in social work identity occurred during the 60s and 70s. Government sponsored mental health clinics were springing up throughout the country and there was a dearth of psychiatrists to provide services. They became administrators and consultants but therapy work was largely done by social workers, psychologists and counselors of varied backgrounds. Prior to this time articles appeared in social work journals differentiating social casework from psychotherapy, the latter being done by psychiatrists and psychologists. But the expanding roles of social workers in mental health changed this. Insurance companies also valued social workers as psychotherapists.

In the late 70s psychiatric training programs moved away from teaching psychoanalytic psychotherapy and instead embraced the use of medication for the spectrum of emotional problems. This shift may well have been related to psychiatrists having competition with social workers and other counselors, who were entering the field of private practice and charging considerably less money. The new emphasis on the use of pharmaceuticals gave psychiatrists a significant advantage. Most social work clinicians held on to the psychodynamic approach.

Mounting research studies were indicating that no one theory or therapy model proved itself any more effective than any other one (Krill, 1980). While a nod was given to the behaviorists by social work clinicians using cognitive-behavioral methods, the theoretical loyalties of many avoided the relationship vagaries of the humanist approach, preferring the diagnostic specifications of the traditional psychodynamic model.

Along with the increased demand for therapy, often promoted by local mental health associations, there occurred a knowledge explosion of new therapy methods and their related theories. Turner's (1974) aforementioned book was an indication of how this array of new ideas was being adopted by many social workers. Jurjevich (1973) also described 28 American original therapy models among psychologists.

In addition to the mental health movement of the 60s there were also social movements for addressing the oppressive conditions of the poor, Blacks, Chicanos, students, women and the handicapped. This became a time when social and family system therapies of social work became popular in schools of social work. These represented a major departure from the individual emphasis of the psychodynamic approach. Soon social work theories of practice appeared that sought to incorporate the many new ideas of the knowledge explosion and social action movements. Social

work was coming into its own regarding theories of practice. It can be noted here that existentialism was born in Europe during the depression years of the 30s and with the horrific destruction of the World War II and the Holocaust. In the United States it became popular among the Beat Generation in the 50s in their reaction to what they perceived as mounting conformity of the post war years. Social critics and theologians were echoing similar concerns. Now, with the changing times for social work in the 70s, existentialism made its appearance in the practice arena.

### **Existential Linkages**

I came upon existentialism in college in 1951. Later I had been taught and supervised from a psychodynamic model, about which I had doubts, but it was the only game in town. Denver had the University of Colorado Medical Center, which trained psychiatrists in the psychoanalytic tradition. Books by Rollo May (1958) and Viktor Frankl (1962) as well as existential journals provided me an alternative for study. Yet it was family therapy that best enabled my departure from the Psychodynamic School. In the mid-60s I adopted a family systems orientation following Jay Haley, Salvador Minuchin and Virginia Satir. I finally found integration with existential thinking through family therapist, Carl Whittaker. Then, becoming a social work professor in 1967 enabled me to pursue study of new therapies appearing and making my own linkage with existential thinking.

William Glaser's reality therapy and Albert Ellis' rational emotive therapy both ignored the deterministic emphasis of the Psychodynamic School. They both affirmed the idea of freedom of choice and the capacity of the individual will to make rational choices. Fritz Perls' gestalt therapy, along with psychodrama, Gendlin's focusing model, and the encounter group movement all emphasized the healing power of here-and-now awareness and the expression thereof. Here was the existential notion of problem solving in a present rather than past orientation. Another allied existential-related belief was that the unconscious had a creative core that could be accessed through present awareness experiencing. This was the spiritual dimension found among religious existentialists and was quite compatible with Jungian and transpersonal psychologies as well. Carl Rogers (1961), Frank Farrelly (Farrelly & Brandsma, 1974) and Sydney Jourard (1964) focused upon the healing function of honest, spontaneous, genuine communication between therapist and client. Here also was the dialogical emphasis of the Jewish existentialist, Martin Buber.

### **Theoretical Dilemmas**

In teaching these exciting new approaches, and being able to link my own existential views with them, I still found students struggling with their ability to conceptualize a workable theory. This issue was minimized for me by ideas from two women therapists – Lynn Hoffman, a social worker and family therapist, and Ann Schaefer, a psychologist. Both were quite disillusioned by the use of psychological theories to explain human beings, and both posed post-modern thinking as an answer

to this dilemma (Hoffman, 2007; Schaef, 1992). I was delighted to find them both alluding to the very conclusions I had come to over years of practice. Modernist theories had sought to theoretically explain human problems and their treatment. For researchers and many professional helpers these ideas were found wanting. Post-modern thinking opened us to the unknown, to the mysteries about human functioning and how to change it. The very vagaries of humanistic psychology people on the subject of healing via the relationship itself were closer to this shifted post-modern awareness.

This idea of no theory would not likely sit well with academia, nor with students paying enormous tuitions in order to learn about human beings and how to help them. I did find an answer to this matter, however, and it lay in the use of that much-discredited notion of an eclectic use of therapy methods.

If the relationship between client and therapist was the key ingredient for fostering change, then the challenge was simply this: How was the therapist to discover a relationship-heightening method with each client? Clients varied in their intelligence, motivation, cultural views of the world and their problems. In order for a worker to be effective with the wide variety of clients coming to social workers for help, one needed a good armamentarium of therapeutic methods. Techniques stemmed from various theories of helping, so in order to learn a variety of methods it would be useful to study the theories from which they came. The eclectic approach was not for the big-hearted helper but rather for one well educated in the varied theories and their methods. One need not be wedded to any particular theory in order to utilize its methods.

### **Quest for Self-Understanding**

Then there are the existential ideas of the absurd, disillusionment, suffering as meaningful, and the importance of personal commitment. During the 50s and 60s many social workers, including myself, believed that a personal psychoanalysis was important for their professional development.

This emphasis on self-discovery seemed to subside by the late 60s and 70s, perhaps because of the rising awareness of social liberation of one sort or another. By the 80s and 90s there were signs of a renewed interest in self-examination – that of spirituality and even religion for many. Even joint degree programs that combined theology and social work were occurring. This was a major departure from the decided split between social work and religion from the 30s to the late 70s. Some students would complain that if the subject of religion was brought up in class there was inevitable scoffing and critical responses, even from faculty. In recent years, by way of contrast, meditation is taught in some social work schools not even affiliated with religious institutions.

My own understanding of practice wisdom is that in addition to knowledge that seeks to explain human beings there are two other important dimensions that professionals need to learn, both of which are valid ways to understand people. First is that of spirituality-religion-philosophy, all of which attempt to see why we are

here and what is the point of it all. Second is heightened awareness of oneself, the self-encounter with one's own hopes and failures, fears and potentials, self-deceptions and new insights. This would be the most direct way of experiencing what it is to be human. Practice wisdom then is the integration of theory (or the lack thereof) with one's spiritual-philosophical view as well as with one's ongoing pursuit of self-awareness. When any of these three areas change significantly, a new level of integration will be called for. Such is the notion of professional development and maturity (Krill, 1990).

### **Existential Perspective**

What is special about existentialism, and how does it differ from other humanistic psychologies? Freedom, the absurd and responsibility are its major themes. Professor Robert C. Solomon of the University of Texas states that existentialism is a movement, a sensibility and not a set of doctrines. Contrary to some who imagine its ideas to be pessimistic, he finds the philosophy to be invigorating and positive. It presents a refreshing view of empowerment (Solomon, 2000). Existentialism, Solomon points out, emphasizes the individual and a life filled with passion, self-understanding and commitment. Let's see what some famed existentialists have to say and how they differ.

Jean-Paul Sartre coined the term "existentialism" and defined it simply as "existence precedes essence." This simple phrase is the basis for personal freedom. We are not a determined nature or personality. Consciousness is our observing self, requiring something of which to be conscious. Consciousness is nothing in itself and exists by giving meaning to situations encountered. The good news to this view is that we are quite free to create our own meanings, limited only by the boundaries of any situation. We create our own destiny from arising possibilities. The disconcerting aspect of this position is that we alone are responsible for our lives. We have no excuses. As Sartre says, we are free whether we like it or not. To realize this generates a troubling anguish, and this painful realization, is what Sartre terms "bad faith." This bad faith imagines oneself to be set in place, usually with deterministic or divine explanations denying awareness of one's freedom. One will use roles – social, work, familial, etc. – to proclaim its solidity. Bad faith is based "in memory" (Solomon, 1972).

Existential psychologist, Rollo May, relates existential guilt and anxiety to this very view of authentic awareness of freedom versus its denial in bad faith. Existential guilt occurs when one denies one's actual potentials for growth and expansion. Existential anxiety occurs at those moments when one is aware of one's possibilities for choice, yet senses the risk to one's established security (May, 1958). Sartre agreed with Nietzsche's conclusion that God is dead, meaning that God no longer seems relevant to modern, self-sufficient man. Nevertheless Sartre valued the writings of Kierkegaard, a Christian, and considered him the father of existentialism.

Kierkegaard viewed reason as useful for pragmatic matters of living; however, he declared rational conceptualization of little value in relation to ultimate truths, i.e.,

personal meaning, destiny, love, God. These activities present paradoxes, which elude reason. Such experiences had to be engaged by freedom of choice, and this freedom was to be had in one's subjective experience –not by objective reasoning. Without a reliable authority on such matters to direct one's choices one experienced fear, trembling and dread, similar to Sartre's anguish. A passionate commitment was called for and this was grounded in a depth and richness of feeling, a "leap of faith." For Kierkegaard bad faith often took the form of lives devoted to pleasure or to duty. He contrasted these with the religious life. While Sartre calls for lucidity and authenticity for responsible living, Kierkegaard speaks of infinite resignation before God, a humility that looks to the mercy of God again and again (Solomon, 1972).

Neither Sartre nor Kierkegaard provides a satisfying description of interpersonal relationships. Sartre's play, *No Exit*, concludes, "Hell is other people" (Sartre, 1955). Kierkegaard himself was a social isolate, lonely and unhappy much of his life. In contrast, Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel, Jewish and Catholic existentialists respectively, both emphasize the importance of interpersonal connections. Spiritual awareness is especially valued between people, with the world of nature, and with God. This view is compatible with science's quantum theory, which describes the universe as a composite of energy forms, a web of vibrating exchanges with endless possibilities (Taylor, 2000).

While there is still the individual's freedom and mysterious unknowns in this perspective, it resembles the universal connections of the mystics in contrast to the apparent lonely anguish of Sartre and Kierkegaard. In fairness to them both, however, it should be noted that they did have valued social relationships: Sartre in the Paris Underground during the war, and Kierkegaard with his Lutheran church community.

The religious existentialist who perhaps embraced freedom the most extensively was Nicolas Berdaev (Vallon 1960). He was Russian Orthodox by tradition, and drew from the mystical writings of Jacob Boehme. Like Sartre, Berdaev believed that freedom is nothingness, but he added that freedom is a nothingness seeking to become something. We humans experience this process as the fire of creative passion. What Sartre described as bad faith Berdaev said was the objectification of freedom. The cooling of freedom's passion into objectified forms was characterized by reason. One's thinking activity was therefore suspect. Too often this objectified process took the forms of dominance of authority, slavery of conformity, and dullness of routines. Freedom, for Berdaev, is a transcendent Spirit, divine in origin. It becomes a repeated upsurge aimed at destroying objectification in its many forms. This may be expressed in love, sympathy, ecstasy, beauty, the need to know, valuing justice, attendance to nature, beauty and wonder. God, he believed, is present in disruptive and creative acts. He described this passion as Messianic will with transformative power in the world (Vallon, 1960).

Historically speaking, prior to the enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, in the western world there was the Judeo-Christian God as an aid and direction for a troubled world, struggling with matters of good and evil, condemnation and grace. With the advent of science and technology and related materialism, humans had

imagined having power to create their own security, pleasure, power roles and destiny. God was eventually removed from the equation and seemed “dead” to human need. Humans could control not only their own behavior but also the economic and political systems of society. Then came the two World Wars, interspersed with the Great Depression, the atomic bombings and Holocaust.

There was an aftermath of fear, confusion, distrust and alienation. Enter the existentialists and later the post-modernists, saying we had fooled ourselves with exaggerated expectations of our own knowledge and hopes. Not only had we found ourselves alienated from nature and each other, but also we had even lost sight of our own centered selves. We felt lost as cogs in a mechanistic wheel of economic and psychological determinism. We were defined by our roles – social, familial, work, gender, racial – all fostering a false sense of our self.

Is it possible to determine a “true self” behind our self-deceptions? The existentialists claim we are free to create our own destinies. Sartre would call this a “nothingness,” meaning that we are not a defined thing, hence “no-nothingness.” The religious existentialists would equate this freedom with Spirit, divine grace and potential – as co-creators with God. Some, like Kazantzakis (1970), would even say we are “Saviors of God” – that God needs us as we need God. Much like Zen Buddhism, or what Abraham Maslow (1962) called “peak experiences,” we have moments when we see reality directly and speak of this as intuitive knowing, wonder, beauty, love and we know we are beyond our predictable social roles and habit patterns of thinking.

### **So What?**

Now here we are in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, worried by insecurities of economic depression, loss of jobs, terrorist attacks, street violence, addictions of many forms, ecological damage to our very planet, broken marriages and divided families, and even uneasy about unknown potential consequences of our computerized society. So how do we address our troubled clients? A professional know-it-all stance with pat answers simply doesn’t ring true these days.

The existential social worker will affirm the values of disillusionment and of finding meaning in suffering. “False self” attitudes and conclusions (bad faith conceptions) are identified and seen to be not only causing but even maintaining personal problems of complaint. Troubling feelings of anxiety, guilt, dread, despair and fear not only reflect deceptions of the false self but also indicate possibilities of choice and new directions. Here you have the existential highlight on choices and commitment.

Most clients enter counseling with a sense of despair about solving their own problems. They doubt their ability to choose and remain doubtful of any clear-cut life direction. The challenge to the worker is how to reveal the reality of personal freedom. Since this is the worker’s own core belief he or she is privy to such matters as meditation, dreams, opening to transcendent experiences such as beauty, wonder, nature and intimacy. The worker identifies false versus true self (authentic)

experiencing, emerging choice possibilities and how responsibility accompanies choices. He or she also sees the inevitable function of interpersonal relationships as undergirding matters of true or false self activation, believing that self-esteem is directly related to the quality of one's existing relationships, or the lack thereof. Even addictions are viewed as maneuvers to substitute for what is lacking in current relationships. While it is true that body chemistry can be affected by emotions and physical deprivations, there is a place for the use of medications. But body harmony can be affected by these same factors just as well, and self-knowledge is thereby valuable.

But what of diagnosis, prognosis, and prescriptive techniques? Hogwash! Says the existential worker. What is important is the understanding and clarification of the client's worldview. This consists of the personal conclusions they maintain about themselves, other people, the world at large, and their own limitations and possibilities. The advent of narrative therapy provided one effective way of accessing this information (Kelley, 2011). Along with such knowledge, it is the worker's job to aid the client in accepting responsibility for one's condition, situation and one's responses to it all. In clarifying the client's worldview and its tie to problems, the worker affirms the client's right to not change it (perhaps even calling it a characteristic rather than problem) or change it.

There is one other thought in relation to a relatively theory-less therapy – probably not available to everyone, but most women would have the advantage of this factor. It is called intuitive knowing and is really a Zen idea. One Korean Zen Master regularly advised his students to avail themselves to “don't know mind” (Sahn, 1976). (Not easy for helping professionals who are expected “to know.”) This is similar to the idea in meditation practice of not getting caught up in one's own conceptualizing. A therapist would be invited to simply be with a client without analyzing or thinking diagnostically or even pragmatically about the client. Nor should the worker be reflecting about oneself – judging, evaluating, and planning. Such a stance was described in Persig's (1974) *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* as simply sitting with a problematic engine without trying to figure out the nature of the malfunction. This need not be viewed as being as mystical as it may sound. There is an integrative-creative activity that can operate when the mind is free of trying and conceptualizing (Krill, 1978). A natural connection occurs between one's consciousness and the presenting client situation. Not only will one likely perceive a deeper understanding of the client, but also one will often be spontaneously moved to a responsive action, an appropriate helpful activity.

A mistaken criticism of the existential approach is that it may only be used for clients motivated to discover personal meaning in their lives. Few of our suffering clients show such a philosophical interest. The existential response to this is “healing is revealing,” an idea shared by Martin Buber and Carl Rogers (Friedman, 1955). Revealing is most likely to occur when the worker is able to discover the most effective road for connecting with any client. The very importance of the eclectic model of many and varied techniques addresses this challenge. The worker knows

that goals in treatment must reflect the particular attitudes a client has about treatment expectations.

One variety of goal possibilities is the following: No Change Desired; Sustaining Relationship Only; Specific Symptom (Behavior) Change; Environmental Change; Relationship Change; Directional Change. Each of these goals can be related to a variety of technique possibilities. This scheme is based upon the appreciation of the unique worldview of any client (Krill, 1968). When the worker meets the client at his or her level of motivation and expectation healing becomes a likely possibility.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The central ideal permeating existential philosophy is that of existential freedom. Sartre describes this as consciousness. Kierkegaard calls it the passion of faith, subjectivity and infinite resignation. Berdaev speaks of it as Spirit and passionate creativity. All three contrast freedom with habitual and learned patterns of self-identity used for personal security, idolization and denial of responsible choice. When experiencing personal freedom we are not necessarily beyond thoughts; we are beyond self-serving thoughts.

As social workers we know firsthand how people have been limited by many factors – social, physical, emotional, racial, class, and gender. Liberation efforts are called for when possible. Where is the choice for them? The existential worker would agree that there is a significant difference between freedom of choice and freedom of opportunity. As Viktor Frankl (1962) pointed out in relation to his own experiences in a German Death Camp, given whatever limits, an important choice remains. He describes such choices as “attitudinal values,” meaning what attitude you choose to take toward your given situation.

Optimism has been a key motivation for most people entering social work. Over time, many have become jaded and discouraged over limited success rates with clients and groups. While existentialists are generally doubtful about the long-range effectiveness of social, economic and political institutions, they do believe in the potential of the individual personality, and this is their very safeguard from cynicism.

Practice wisdom is called for if we are to use ourselves effectively with the wide array of troubled people we serve. The themes of freedom, authenticity and passionate commitment, which characterize existentialism, are not just aims for helping clients. They are guidelines for the worker himself/herself.

Many helping professionals are tempted to seek clients who are somewhat similar to themselves, e.g., neurotics, addicts, abused, having gender or sex identity struggles, etc. Such knowledge from personal experience is meritorious – the commitment of the “wounded healer.” Too often, however, these preferences limit the growth and range of knowledge of the worker.

The pursuit of the spirit of freedom is really a creative venture. Social work has been associated with the poor, misfits, marginal, homeless, lost and “crazies.” Usually these people are unable to pay for private practice. Welfare workers often lack

graduate degrees, so their skills and knowledge are often wanting. Seriously disturbed people are too often left to psychiatrists and other medical doctors, with medication and “follow-up” as their primary treatments.

If one wishes to get beyond the limiting comfort of “workable clients” one needs to consider this basic observation: To expand your helping skills and even discover new insights about yourself, seek out people who are very different from you and your past experiences and find ways to connect with them in a compassionate, helping role. Here is an opportunity to actualize Berdaev’s free spirit by means of “disruptive and creative acts.” Disrupt your own comfort zones and enter the unknowns of true strangers so as to engage your own creative juices.

Of course there is the economic factor. Many of these marginal types cannot afford your service, or don't fit agency policy. So keep doing what you're good at and pay the bills and also volunteer some limited time with the downtrodden who are alien to you. Agencies overloaded with caseloads will be happy for your service and mental health associations can readily provide you with such opportunities.

The challenge of existential thinking is not finding meaningful philosophical discussions with your clients (like yourself), but rather how to engage others of all types, many being fearful and doubtful about the possibility of any caring relationship. Remember what authors Dostoevsky and Solzhenitsyn learned in prison camps – not only about themselves but also of the human condition.

Existential social work and psychotherapy may well be the most appropriate helping approaches for our current cultural condition of anomie. Clients, regardless of their psychological or social limitation, do experience confusion about the present state of our nation, culture and ourselves. There is a deep need for meaning and fulfillment despite our many material advantages. Existentialism can respond to matters of spiritual transcendence regardless of the language used to describe such imperative experiences.

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