EXISTENTIAL THERAPY AND PLURALISM

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Supplementary material for *Existential Therapies: Contributions to a pluralistic practice* (Sage, 2014), Chapter 1.

Can existential therapy really can be viewed--and practiced--in a pluralistic way. Within the UK existential therapy field, pluralistic therapy (Cooper & McLeod, 2011) has been described as a 'naïve, inept and ghastly approach' (Shandy, 2012, p. 8): a 'hideous amalgam' that fails to really stand for anything. 'Have you ever mixed paints,' asks 'Tristam Shandy', 'and come up with brown?' Along these lines, Molyneux (2014, p. 33) argues against the miscegenation of different approaches on the grounds that therapists of different orientations hold fundamentally incompatible views of human nature. 'I think we at least owe it to our clients to create a space that is fully committed,' he writes, 'while also being free from confusion and contradiction.' How is it possible, for instance, to combine an existential approach that views human beings as fundamentally free with a cognitive-behavioural approach that views them as fundamentally determined? (Groth, 2010). Spinelli (2014, p. 7) also raises concerns about mixing existential therapy with other therapeutic orientations. The existential approach, for him, 'is *much more than* a collection of themes that might be shared with other approaches.' Rather, it is radical, alternative perspective: intersubjective, holistic and non-diagnostic. In these respects, argues Spinelli (2014, p. 9) does not 'sit easily' with the current dominant models of theory and practice within psychology.

At the same time, recent years have seen a range of attempts to develop more integrative forms of existential therapy. Within the British school, for instance, Milton and colleagues (2002; 2003) have argued for the need to go beyond schoolism, and there have been attempts to integrate existential therapy with brief solution focused therapy (Langdridge, 2006), mindfulness (Nanda, 2010, p. 338), and other 'third wave' forms of CBT (Claessens, 2009). Similarly, in the meaning-focused field, Längle's (2003, p. 69) existential analysis integrates a broad range of ideas and practices into logotherapy, while Wong's (2013, p. 628) meaning-centred counselling assimilates 'elements of cognitive-behavioural, narrative, cross-cultural and positive therapies' into an explicitly integrative framework. The existential-humanistic field, too, has explicitly described its approach as 'existential-integrative' (Schneider, 2008) and, more recently, 'pluralistic' (Schneider & Krug, 2010, p. 10); with Schneider (2008, p. 3) writing that it is 'complementary to and integrative of other practice modalities.' Indeed, as Yalom (1974) or Cannon (1991; 2012) demonstrate, for decades, many existential therapists have been drawing on a wide range of practices, including psychodynamic interpretations, gestalt therapy chair-work, and advice-giving.

So is such integration legitimate? To a great extent, it depends on how one understands an existential approach. If an existential perspective is held as revealing *the* truth about the nature of being, and existential therapy as the 'royal road' to achieving this realisation, then any additional perspectives or practices can only serve to dilute or undermine it. But if existentialism is understood as a philosophy that questions any fixed certainties -- and which appreciates the complexity, indefinability and individuality of being -- it would seem contradictory to hold that this philosophy or practice, itself, is *the* definitive truth on human being. Rather, from this perspective, existentialism can be seen as one particular worldview, combinable with others, that is of greater or lesser value to different people at different points in time. Indeed, from this perspective, it could be argued that a pluralistic or

integrative perspective is not only compatible with an existential perspective, but is a natural extension of it: an existential way of being an existential therapist.

There are other ways, however, in which a pluralistic perspective could be seen as inconsistent with an existential approach. As we shall see in Chapter 2, for instance, an existential stance tends to emphasise a non-agenda driven 'being with' the other, while the pluralistic approach emphasises working towards explicitly agreed *goals* (Cooper & McLeod, 2011). Similarly, while existential therapies tend to be 'technique averse' (Nanda, 2010, p. 343), the pluralistic approach is open to a wide range of therapeutic methods and strategies. Another way of looking at this, however, is that a pluralistic focus on goals is simply a making transparent of the human orientation towards purposes: a key assumption within existential philosophy (Chapter 6). And techniques and strategies can be seen as consistent with the existential emphasis on concrete, direct, and active ways of helping clients to address problems in living. Mosher (2004, p. 297), founder of the existentially-informed Soteria programme, exemplifies this pragmatic attitude when he writes: 'Ask your clients what they want, and do your best to help them get it. If what they want is beyond your ability to help them get it, say so. If what they want can be better achieved elsewhere, tell them where they might go, and help them get there.'

The pluralistic emphasis on shared decision-making could also be seen as consistent with some existential perspectives, and inconsistent with others. On the one hand, as the quote from Mosher (2004) suggests, it could be considered aligned to an existential pragmatism; as well as a valuing of the client's capacity for freedom and choice. Yet it could also be seen as a blindness to the fact that clients are immersed in a world of socially-constructed meanings and desires (Heidegger, 1962). Hence, what clients *think* they want may bear very little relation to what could *actually* help them. Indeed, as Yalom (1980, p. 461) states 'the therapist's first step must be *not* to accept at face value the patient's formulation of the problem.'

Where nearly all existential approaches do align with pluralism, however, is on the importance of talking to clients about the process of therapy and a transparency in the therapist--client relationship (e.g., Yalom, 2001). Indeed, what is integral to both approaches is an emphasis on dialogue and the therapeutic relationship.

A pluralistic approach, then, is both consistent and inconsistent with an existential position, depending on how the latter is viewed. In general, as suggested above, it is more likely to be seen as compatible if an existential worldview is held relatively lightly; and if a therapist is more open to being focused, active and structured in their work. Therapists who come to an existential approach through an interest in mutuality, dialogue and client empowerment may also be more open to a pluralistic perspective.

Finally, when considering the relationship between pluralistic and existential approaches, it is important not just to focus on what the former can contribute to the latter, but also what the latter can contribute to the former (Milton et al., 2002; Milton et al., 2003). Milton and colleagues, for instance, write: 'existential psychotherapy has the potential to augment and deepen narrower epistemological frameworks by providing a rich contextual base and soulfulness for understanding the overarching principles of what it is to be human' (Milton et al., 2003, p. 115). Indeed, a principal aim of the present book is to do exactly this: to draw out the aspects of an existential approach that can be contribute to a wider practice. This is both in terms of the philosophical 'soulfulness' described by Milton et al, and in terms of more concrete methods of therapeutic work.

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