



NATIONAL RESEARCH UNIVERSITY
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EXISTENTIAL APPROACHES: ARE
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DIFFERENT?**

BASIC RESEARCH PROGRAM

WORKING PAPERS

SERIES: PSYCHOLOGY
WP BRP 14/PSY/2013

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CLIENT-CENTERED AND EXISTENTIAL APPROACHES: ARE THEY MOSTLY SIMILAR OR DIFFERENT?²

This article analyzes Client-Centered (Person-Centered) and Existential approaches in counseling and psychotherapy. The proximity of these approaches, both in theoretical and practical terms, is demonstrated.

Keywords: Client-Centered Psychotherapy(CCT), Person-Centered approach (PCA), Existential approach, quality of contact between client and counselor, centration on experience of client, phenomenology, awareness, comprehension, choice, full-functioning, being in vital world.

JEL Classification: Z

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²This article presents reflections and comparison of the Client-centered and Existential approaches as a result of decades of the author's practicing and teaching these approaches.

Introduction

I will begin this article with an explication of my own theoretical and personal positions relating to the subject of my analysis. I consider it necessary to do this in as much as it will be of help for the reader to better and more deeply understand my observations, reflections, and conclusions about the relationship between the Person-Centered and Existential approaches in psychological counseling and psychotherapy. Such a course corresponds to tendencies in the modern humanities (and in science as a whole) as knowledge is becoming viewed as inseparable from those who hold knowledge, is personal (Polanyi, 1958), is included in existing scientific discourses, contexts, and dialogues, and is a social construct (Gadamer, 1975; Kvale, 1996; Habermas, 1971 ;Giorgi, 1975, etc.).

First of all, my professional training at the Faculty of Psychology at Moscow State University, where I prepared my doctoral thesis, as well as various contacts and communications with a large number of colleagues who share similar theoretical and methodological platforms, ensured me in the depth and huge potential of the cultural-activity approach. Through a prism of categories, concepts, and theories of cultural-activity psychology, it is possible to see and comprehend a person and his or her development in a context of socio-cultural being.

Secondly, in my work as a counselor and in scientific studies of psychological practice, I strongly stand on positions in favor of the Person-Centered approach, developed by Carl Rogers and his colleagues and followers (Rogers C.R., 1959, 1980). My personal and professional identity is definite and certain: The core of my counseling practice is the Person-Centered Approach (PCA), which stresses as the basis of psychological assistance a true and authentic contact between a professional and a patient who has asked for help (client), and emphasizes the counselor's presence at this contact as being congruent, empathetic, and unconditionally positive regarding the client. In these conditions, the client has the opportunity "to return to oneself". He or she starts to listen to deep authentic impulses and intuitions of rather private or global vital questions and problems, to trust oneself, and to assume responsibility for solving difficulties and for organization of one's life. As a result, specific problems are resolved and the person becomes more authentic or harmonizing with more integrity, more definition, and surer in one's purposes and values, more successful and satisfied, and personally grows in the process of life.

Thirdly, philosophical statements about the Existential approach³ are extremely important for me in my personal life and professional practice. Such statements include: the unity of the person and world; a personal being in the world is always filled with unique personal "care" (Heidegger M., 1962) in the course of which the individual's vital world forms, or *Lebenswelt*(Husserl, 1963, Binswanger, 1967); there exists inevitable existential tensions, as characteristic attributes of human life, and there is need for the development of personal conscious attitude to them for the constructive continuation of one's own life (Yalom, 1999); understanding, comprehension, and personal choice is the basis of a free and responsible life. I am convinced of the necessity of self-determination in our one's life – that we create and maintain own "world" and "life" by our choices and practical vital activity. Our life and world are subjects of our meaningful conscious

³ The existential approach in psychotherapy consists of several different traditions. It is possible to distinguish American (R. May, J. Bugental, I. Yalom, and others) and European (V. Frankl, I. Binswanger, M. Boss, and others) schools, which differ in concrete theoretical views and practical applications. Yet all existential traditions share some basic principles, which allows us to talk about the Existential approach as a definite branch of psychotherapy.

and responsible activity. These beliefs can influence my professional practice – my interaction with clients. Being congruent, in situations when the client comes to and faces difficult existential issues, I share these beliefs and views, supporting and deepening the client's search. Thus, my Person-Centered Approach “is generously infused” with existential beliefs and practices, and I see in it, on the one hand, a feature of my individual counseling style and, on the other hand, a manifestation of a wide-spread integrative tendency in counseling and psychotherapy.

The integrative tendency in modern psychological practice (Corey, 1991, etc.) might be seen as a framework of the subject under discussion. Similarity and differences among different approaches, common and different psychological processes and mechanisms underlying different psychological practices, presence or absence of common base for combining of different approaches into a coherent practice – all these are actual questions under discussion in the professional community.

An inevitable reflection of these conditions about the relationship between the Person-Centered and Existential approaches has led me to some ideas and conclusions, which I want to share herein.

I. Theoretical proximity or distinction?

Many prominent foreign and Russian psychologists have a view of the Person-Centered and Existential approaches as differing on intrinsic bases. D.A. Leontyev (1997), for example, making a reference to the corresponding discussion in western psychology, claims that these are two different approaches. The first argument of D.A. Leontyev is that essence precedes existence in the Person-Centered approach: The essence of the person is initially given and congenital. It is positive, constructive, and social, and is developed in the course of a person's actualizing and self-actualization. Close to this position is that of A.B. Orlov, who suggests to even change the name of Client-Centered psychotherapy to “Essential” therapy (Orlov, 2010), in as much as this approach deploys the initially set essence of a person in the course of creating certain conditions of therapeutic contact. In the Existential approach, existence precedes and determines essence: The vital choices and activity of a person define, as a result, the substantial characteristics of one's personality.

Without challenging the formal reliability of the above argument, let us try to look at Carl Rogers's position more deeply. Really, more than once in his works he claims that all his practical experience convinces him of the existence of an innate actualizing tendency (for example, Rogers, 1959, 1994).

However Rogers always speaks about revealing the actualizing tendency in given conditions, when in given conditions an organism – be it human or any other living object – seeks to more fully realize one's vital potential. The result of a manifestation of the actualizing tendency always bears in itself the influence of development conditions. Sickly potatoes with pale shoots forgotten in a cellar, or a magnificent fecund plant, as well as a creative and moral or mistrustful and even antisocial person are natural results of setting out the actualizing tendency in adverse conditions.

A human's actualizing tendency is mediated by consciousness. This tendency is an aspiration to be actualized in accord with aspects of experience, symbolized in the conscious self-concept. An organism's tendency to actualize and the actualizing tendency mediated by consciousness, reveal themselves at the same time in consent or contradiction with each other. A result of their collaboration in the given conditions can be either a harmonious or disharmonious personality.

The Existential approach, which confers prime importance to the choice in any life situation as defining the essence of a person, describes a process identical to that presented above in terms of actualizing in given conditions. A holistic person in the "here-and-now" (Heidegger, 1962) consciously and unconsciously weighs and correlates possibilities of development in given conditions and follows some "optimum" variant in his or her life system. A developing result of each choice bears in itself both reflections of previous dispositions of the person and the conditions and content of the carried-out choice.

A basic, intrinsic similarity appears in the understanding of the person and one's development in the discussed approaches.

D.A. Leontyev's second argument (1997) in favor of the basic differentiation of Existential and Person-Centered approaches is an appeal to the methodological constructs of "ontology of the isolated individual" and "ontology of the vital world", introduced by F.E. Vasilyuk (1994). According to D.A. Leontyev's reasoning, in PCA a person is considered as a self-sufficient essence, which is not considered in connection with the vital world, meaning that it is considered in a framework of "ontology of the *isolated individual*". In the Existential approach, a person and a world cannot be considered out of connection with each other, meaning that the methodological principle of "ontology of the *vital world*" is realized.

But, as revealed by the above analysis, the actualizing tendency is always shown in some concrete conditions of the vital world of the person. A result of the manifestation of this tendency always fits more or less successfully to this vital world. Consequently, according to the commitment to the "ontology of the vital world", PCA is close to the Existential approach.

D.A. Leontyev's (1997) third argument, which also leans on the materials of wide discussions, concerns a sphere of ethics regarding the problem of "good and evil". Carl Rogers, as D.A. Leontyev rightly notes, wrote that his practical experience convinces him of the positive nature of a human being, when the innate actualizing tendency leads to the development of a social, creative, and moral person. But Rogers always said that this essence is shown and develops in certain conditions. In other conditions, the deployment of actualizing and the tendency towards self-actualization can lead to other results that are sometimes very far from good and moral. PCA is not opposed to, but close to the Existential approach, claiming that the person is not predisposed a priori towards good or evil. A person chooses and creates this or that in life.

From our point of view, the cultural-activity theory in psychology, which was actively developed in Russia (Vygotsky L.S., Leontyev A.N., Rubinstein S.L., and others), also allows us to take into question the natural character of a person's constructive development. In my previous works (Kolpachnikov, 2004, 2007, 2010), I tried to show that Person-Centered interaction is devised in a way such that its philosophy, relations, and activity are interiorized by a person who gets to this cultural and psychotechnical system. In actuality, Person-Centered interaction – as cultural

formation by its nature – is social and dialogical when attentive and empathically understanding. Another acts as a sincere and interested witness of experiences and searches of a person. This interested empathetic presence acts as a catalyst of a reflexive position, sensitivity, intuition, and intelligence of the person, so that a more successful solution of an actual problem is promoted, and the solution is being put to life with necessary energy and responsibility. At the same time, there is an assimilation – an interiorization – of a similar way of action while solving different problems. A person grows and becomes capable of such actions independently. In my publications I tried to argue the relevance and efficiency of applying the concept of a “social situation of development”(which was initially introduced by Lev Vygotsky for explaining child development in social conditions), for understanding the change of a person in applying “basic” Person-Centered conditions. This example is an illustration of the methodological potential of the theory of cultural-activity psychology for the analysis of development of a person in the so-called psychotechnical, including educational, counseling, and psychotherapeutic and the so-called “natural”, or everyday conditions of relations (interpersonal, business, etc.).

Summing up this lead-up to the theoretical bases of the Person-Centered and Existential approaches, I wish to make the inference that there is a lack of principal differences in their theoretical bases. That is, they are *very close* in their principal theoretical foundations.

II. Practice in Client-Centered Psychotherapy and Existential Approaches: Similarities and Differences

Let’s consider some basic moments of similarity between practice in the Client-Centered psychotherapy and the Existential approaches.

2.1 Quality of contact between counselor and client

The quality and specific features of this contact are the main conditions and a source of positive changes of a client in the therapeutic process. It is recognized both in Client-Centered psychotherapy and in the Existential approach.

The conditions of a client’s positive changes in Client-Centered therapy are accurately formulated by C. Rogers (1959). They are as follows:

1. Psychological contact of a therapist and a client.
2. Client is not congruent.
3. Therapist is congruent.
4. Therapist is empathetic.
5. Therapist unconditionally positively regards the client.
6. Therapist expresses, transfers to the client the unconditional positive regard, empathy, and congruence.

In reality, the quality of an empathetic presence, with unconditional positive acceptance and congruence of the counselor, were more than once stressed by C. Rogers both theoretically and

empirically as necessary and sufficient conditions of positive changes for the client (see, for example, Rogers, 1959).

Carl Rogers and his practice remain samples of unlimited respectfulness, sensitivity, and sincerity in relationships with clients. Qualities of this contact act as a condition and a catalyst of the positive changes of a client.

The quality of contact between client and counselor is also declared in the Existential approach as a condition and source of positive changes of a client.

J. Bugental, one of the outstanding representatives of the Existential approach, emphasizes the quality of presence as the main condition of positive changes of a client in psychotherapy. “Presence is a name for the quality of being in a situation or relationship in which one intends at a deep level to participate as fully as she is able. Presence is expressed through the mobilization of one’s sensitivity – both inner (to the subjective) and outer (to the situation and the other person in it) – and through bringing into action one’s ability to respond” (Bugental, 1987, p. 27). Presence is thusly operationalized by J. Bugental through the following: 1) *accessibility*, which “designates the extent to which one believes that what will happen in a situation will matter or will have an effect on her”, and 2) *expressiveness*, which is “the extent to which one intends to let oneself be truly known by others in a situation” (ibid, p. 27). It is claimed that for positive changes in therapeutic contact the quality of presence for both a therapist and a client are important. But the quality of presence of the former is an indispensable condition of initiation and support of positive changes for the latter.

The quality of contact between therapist and client as a main condition of positive therapeutic results is emphasized by such outstanding representatives of Existential approach as Irvin Yalom (1980), Rollo May (1939), Gerald Corey (1991), and others.

2.2 Joint concentration on the experience and life situation of a client

In PCA, empathy is the “main” engine of the process of counseling. Below is a wonderful description by Carl Rogers of how empathy allows one to concentrate and to be in an experience and the living world⁴ of a client: “An empathetic way of being with another person has several facets. It means entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it. It involves being sensitive, moment by moment, to the changing of felt meanings that flow in the other person, to the fear, range, tenderness, confusion, or whatever that he or she is experiencing. It means temporarily living in the other’s life, moving about in it delicately without making judgments. It means sensing meanings of which he or she is scarcely aware, but not trying to totally uncover unconscious feelings, since this would be too threatening. It includes communicating your sensing of the person’s world as you look with fresh and unafrightening eyes at elements of which he or she is fearful. It means frequently checking with the person as to the accuracy of your sensings, and being guided by the responses you receive. You are a confident companion to the person in his or her inner world. By pointing to the possible meanings in the flow of another person’s experience, you help the other to focus on this useful type of referent in experience the meanings more fully, and to move forward in the experiencing of them.

⁴ Notice the existential terminology in Carl Rogers’s writings! - V.K.

“To be with another in this way means that for the time being you lay aside your own views and values in order to enter the world of another without prejudice. In some sense it means that you lay aside yourself. This can only be done by persons who are secure enough in themselves that they know they will not get lost in what may turn out to be a strange or bizarre world of the other individual, and that they can comfortably return to their own world when they wish” (Rogers, 1980, p. 142-143).

In the Existential approach, sensitive and attentive presence is the most important condition of assistance to the client’s search of a solution to Existential problems. Short psychotherapeutic novels by Irvin Yalom (1998) and James Bugental (1976), which are popular both in professional circles and among the wide public, are filled with unlimited attention to clients and their experience in their life situations. That attention to experience a client and one’s own experiences of a therapist allows the former to experience, understand-comprehend, and, as a result, to change one’s life for the better.

2.3 Phenomenology

This parameter of comparison is both connected to and develops the previous ones. Phenomenology is a distinctive feature of Existentialism. Edmund Husserl (1963) has introduced the concept of the phenomenological method as a way to see how a phenomenon opens to a knower “as it is”. Martin Heidegger (1962) argues that phenomenology is the main way to know the vital world of a person.

Phenomenology, meaning the aspiration to understand as the world opens to another person, is a distinctive feature of modern Existential psychotherapy. All therapeutic and counseling work is based on this.

A refusal to relate to a person as an object, an emphasis on human subjectivity, which is placed in the Person-Centered approach, defines the stress of phenomenology. Carl Rogers repeatedly emphasizes CCT/PCA phenomenology, describing a process of empathy: “The state of empathy, or being empathetic, is to perceive an internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings that pertain thereto, as if one were the person, but without ever losing the ‘as if’ condition. Thus, it means to sense the hurt or the pleasure of another as he senses it and to perceive the causes thereof as he perceives them, but without ever losing the recognition that it is as if I were hurt or pleased and so forth. If this ‘as if’ quality is lost, then the state is one of identification” (Rogers, 1980, p.p.140-141).

2.4 Awareness and Self-awareness

What follows is a description of awareness, Self-awareness, and their role in Existential counseling and psychotherapy by Gerald Corey, a well-known representative of the Existential approach: “We can choose to either expand or restrict our consciousness. Because self-awareness is at the root of most other human capacities, the decision to expand it is fundamental to human growth... Increasing self-awareness, which includes awareness of alternatives, motivations, factors influencing the person, and personal goals, is the aim of all counseling” (Corey, 1991, p.p. 190-191).

In the Person-Centered approach, awareness of experience is the basis of congruence, and therefore the basis of authentic, self-satisfying, full functioning of a person – the basis of one’s psychological and personal health. Accurate symbolization of experience is an extremely important task for a client and a counselor. Carl Rogers emphasizes it by describing the process of Client-Centered psychotherapy (Rogers, 1959, 1980). Becoming aware of and accepting an experience that was denied or distorted before underlies psychological healing and constructive change and personal growth.

2.5 Search for personal meaning and personal choice as main targets of counseling in PCA and the Existential approach

A search for personal meaning, comprehending one’s life situation, and making conscious and responsible choices are central contents and targets of counseling in the Existential approach. According to Viktor Frankl (2006) and his followers (Laengle, 2003), the need to find and embody personal meaning is a basic and leading need of a person. Gerald Corey (1991), Irvin Yalom (1980), James Bugental (1976), and others emphasize the role and value of conscious and responsible personal choices in forming the being of a person.

What is central in the work of a Client-Centered therapist? He or she creates conditions for a client to discover the best decisions and make choices on the basis of being open to experiences and their comprehension and symbolism. From my point of view, this completely corresponds to the previously mentioned “targets” of the Existential approach.

Scientific knowledge of personal choice, its process, and essence developed in the actual practice of the Existential and Person-Centered approaches. This is a good example of how practice becomes a method and a tool of knowing complex psychological realities.

As an illustration of this productive scientific cooperation between the two considered approaches, we will briefly describe the main procedural and substantial characteristics of the process of personal choice as it is found in psychotherapy. Quite often the situation of an Existential, personal choice is not initially realized by a person (Rogers, 1980, Yalom, 1999, Corey, 1991). In the course of psychotherapy and dialogue with a counselor, the client gradually acquires integrity and complete openness to the experience, its authenticity, and congruence – although often through defense and resistance (Rogers, 1959, Bugental, 1987). Carl Rogers (1980) characterizes this process as a client gradually “returning to his or herself” in the presence of a genuine and empathetic psychotherapist. This process is precisely traced and commented by Carl Rogers in a number of his works (for example, Rogers, 1959, 1980). Supporting authentic and sincere contact with a client, existential psychologists quite often introduce at last the idea of one’s actual life situation as being the result of a chain of previous vital choices – conscious or unconscious – and that therefore one holds responsibility both for this situation and for finding and making the best choice in an actual situation. Search for and embodiment of such a choice demands careful comprehension of a life situation and one’s presence in that situation (Corey, 1991).

In the course of comprehending one’s own life situation, a client gains a holistic and coordinated picture (a Gestalt) of his or her life situation. Sometimes finding this Gestalt occurs by means of an insight – an instant of inspiration and clear understanding of the complete picture and the best

choice. Finding the best solution is very much reminiscent of an insight to the solution of intellectual tasks (Duncker, 1935) or an insight in finding a creative decision in a scientific or inventive activity, and also a phenomenon of precedence for an emotional solution to an actual rational solution, as found and described by Oleg Tikhomirov with his colleagues (Tikhomirov, 2008).

But finding such a complete Gestalt is often the result of a gradual and long movement of the client on the path to understanding and comprehending one's life in contact with a counselor. The client receives clarification of his or her own meanings and values and clarification of the value of these circumstances, be it in the context of the benefits for the organism (self-actualizing), or in the context of well-being and happiness, understood as "an entire life well-lived" (Adler, 1987), or as situational satisfaction, depending on individual ideas of happiness and an individual's concept of life.

It seems extremely important to emphasize the following here:

1. "The best" decision or choice is revealed in the context of the individual being of a concrete person, in a system of one's main values, meanings and purposes, in one's individual vital world. There is no use of speaking about some universal and absolutely best choice out of the context of this particular individual's vital world.
2. The comprehension of one's life situation and the self-determination of a client occurs in a course of dialogical contact and relations with a counselor.

As shown in the research of Marina Filonik (2009), which was conducted under our supervision, finding the best solution or choice fills a person with states of clarity and quietness, deep conviction in the validity of the choice and being ready to realize this choice in his or her life. The choice becomes "clear and transparent" (Vasilyuk, 1994). Carl Rogers (1959, 1980) often described these states of clarity, transparency, and conviction as a result of a client's finding the best choice for oneself.

As a result, the self-actualizing of a person on the basis of such conscious choices is carried out in the conditions of a comprehended and meaningful life situation and a concrete vital world of the person. In this formulation, the concepts of the analyzed approaches are intertwined in the substantial description of the phenomenon found both in Existential and Person-Centered counseling.

2.6 The ultimate goal of therapy and counseling

The ultimate goal of therapy and counseling in the Existential approach is a conscious, full, and authentic life in accordance with oneself and the existence of a person in the vital world. James Bugental writes very brightly and convincingly about it in his book "The Search for Existential Identity" (1976).

The ultimate goal of therapy and counseling in the Person-Centered approach and in Client-Centered Psychotherapy is openness to experiences, trust of oneself, an Existential style of life – experiencing each moment of life as new – and, on the basis of all of these, the constructive, full functioning of a person.

Conclusions

The Person-Centered and Existential approaches in counseling and psychotherapy are extremely similar. That is true both for the theoretical foundations of the approaches and for carried-out practices and procedures. The distinctions are mainly on the terminological level.

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