

Objectives of Existential Psychology and Existential Psychotherapy



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answering Paul Wong's introduction to IJEPP

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I consider it a great stroke of luck for all those working within the field of existential psychology and psychotherapy to have such an initiative as the one of Paul Wong and his collaborators. It really seems to provide us with a new impulse in theory, research and practice and, above all, it marks a step in collecting and concentrating forces, ideas and interests on a global level. Maybe this can show up one day to be another step to a more unified, cooperative, interrelated, honestly working and personally encountering world for which I also heartedly like to contribute. And for which we should invite to join other people.

In his introduction to – let us assumingly call it – this *new era of existential psychology* Paul Wong lists the most important tasks of existential psychology (although not so much those of existential psychotherapy). I totally agree in the importance both of a *positive philosophy* behind an effective existential psychology and of a *practical orientation* of its theory. The linkage of existential psychology with practice – like an adequate set of psychotherapies and preventions – is in my opinion inherent to an existential psychology which, on the other hand, forms the theoretical framework to that practice.

I would like to give a statement to Paul Wong's appealing introduction in my function as president of the International Society Existential Analytical Psychotherapy (ISEAP). It takes up each theme of Paul's address. First of all I would like to reflect on the specific task of existential psychology, than to try shortly a broadest possible definition of existential psychotherapy, thirdly to formulate a structure of possible existential themes and questions and finally to give a remark on the methods of investigation.

1.) The specific task of existential psychology (EP)

It seems important to me that this "psychology of human existence" is one for "real people in concrete situations" (Wong). It must therefore be applicable in everyday's life as well as in extreme life situations (Grenzsituationen – K. Jaspers). This aptitude derives from its referring to the personal (human) potentialities (like attitudes, decisions, responsibility...) and underlying existential structures (cf. below). EP mainly helps people to come to a *fulfilling and rewarding personal existence*.

This means that the application of EP should be limited to the reflection of concrete situations of concrete persons which, according e.g. to Viktor Frankl, is seen the basis for existential meaning and existential thinking. Only the individual is capable for decisions and responsibility. The change of complex structures like families, groups, systems, nations starts with the activation of the individual's freedom, authenticity and responsibility. The survival of humanity may be a result but not a direct intention of the endeavours of EP. The more comprehensive the duty the less comprehensible it is (according to K. Jaspers). It would also contradict the phenomenological attitude of EP if we tried to develop general rules of behaviour for mankind, politicians etc. And even if we had the power we must not use it but work on the personal level of conviction and attitudes. Our goal is not to better the world or mankind but to free the individual and make us aware of possible choices. – How can define the "good and evil" for others? – It seems to me helpful if we restrict our intentions from the beginning to this level and to let open a possible, fruitful result for larger groups. (Is this restriction too European?) – EP refers to a high degree on values and has therefore an inherent

danger of ideology, moralization and secular religion. The intention of changing others brings along the danger of imposition.

I totally agree not to limit our thinking with the “long shadows” of the philosophers of the last century and to develop our “own identity” which is probably a new one with a “redefinition of EP”. But this does not necessarily mean to *break* with history or “to step out” of it, it may also be a prolongation of the existing, a recombination, a new accentuation in the light of the new questions and challenges of our time. Let us see how it comes and what we need! – By saying this I am sure Paul meant it this way.

2. Attempt to define Existential Psychotherapy (EPT)

Paul’s introduction, in my opinion, refers mainly to EP but few is said about EPT. We also need an attempt of definition for EPT.

As the most common basis for all EP and EPT holds the human capability for decision-making and in consequence for taking over responsibility. As far as I know all authors of the field would have been to be cited here.

The most common basis for *existential counselling* is the work with explication and arguments to achieve insights, decisions, attitudes, convictions (e.g. Frankl 1982).

The most common basis for EPT is to introduce an accompanied process of growth and/or change in an individual or in a group of individuals on the basis of their own experience. The common hub may therefore lie in the individual’s lived and affected experience (Erleben).

An attempt of a practical definition on this basis could be:

EPT is a psychotherapeutic method to help people to come to live with inner consent to their own actions.

3. The fundamental existential questions

Paul gave a challenging sample of questions for EP and EPT dividing them into four groups: essence of existence (with its moral scale); anthropology (“true self”); conditions of human existence (integration of duality); influential power on the conditions.

If we look for a system to cluster possible questions for EP and EPT it could be adequate to have one which includes a constant view on the “human being interrelated” and simultaneously being based on possible structures of existence. I would therefore like to make a proposition for a systematic arrangement of the existential questions around the probably most *fundamental four dimensions of existence* (e.g. Längle 2003):

- 3.1 The relation to the *physical world* with its conditions for physical overcoming. It is based e.g. on struggling for place, power, money, influence; corporality, protection; the dealing with it has spiritual underpinnings in hold, trust, hope, courage, faith, fundamental trust.
- 3.2 The relation to one’s *own life* with its dimension of relationship to others and relation to oneself. This point is based on affects, moods, emotions, drives and values; of dealing with time, transitoriness; the finding of closeness, embrace, friendship, love, inner movement, grief, attitude toward life.
- 3.3 The relation to the *self as a unique and autonomous person* which can only be developed in the interchange with other persons. It claims for attention, encounter and respect; for justice and justification, autonomy, responsibility, morality, ethics, remorse and forgiveness; for appreciation of oneself and others and for the development of self-esteem which is linked to authenticity.
- 4.3 The relation to the *greater contexts* we live in and which form our future, providing us with values to work on, to develop, because we identify with and want to stand within their horizon. This is a more systemic aspect of existence, a developmental and an active at the same time. In this greater interrelation we find the meanings in our life and face absurdity.

The loss of one or more of these fundamental dimensions with their manifold appearances leads to the installation of the psychic power as *reflexes of protection* for the only purpose to secure overcoming the situation. Hence raise different types of aggression and reactions most common in sufferings by others and by oneself. – It is obvious that this listing does not replace a real explanation and the reader may forgive the brevity. –

Most of Paul's questions can be matched easily to these four dimensions. The main difference is that these structural questions don't yield concrete contents as answers but look for an approach to find answers. A question like Paul's "What is the meaning of life in light of these negative givens?" turns to: "How can we find meaning...".

Let me give some examples of typical questions just to give an impression:

To 3.1 Relation to the world: Can I/we live under the actual political, economical, health etc. situation? What makes existence difficult, what allows it, what endorses it? Which conditions could be changed to the better by myself, what do I/we need for a change etc.? Where can we find protection? How can we reduce our hate etc.? On which do I/we trust? How well do we perceive reality and holding structures? – The whole theme of anxiety and courage comes up here.

To 3.2 Relation to life: How do I/we feel our being here? What gives us joy, what deepens our emotions? What can I/we do to have close relationships? Do I/we maintain closeness and do I/we allow closeness to others? Under which conditions? Do I/we take time for valuable things? Is this real life what I live? How can I/we discern "real life"? How can we find values? Do I/we love life? – The themes of moods and depression forms part of this dimension of existence.

To 3.3 Relation to one's autonomous self: What gives me/us identity? What gives us the right to be ourselves and how can we interrelate than with others? How can we consider (better) our boundaries? For what do I appreciate myself, yourself? How do I get rid with solitude, shame? Do I have open access to my intimacy, my intimate feelings? How can I be better identical with myself, be more authentic? Why is it a value at all? What are the fundamentals of self-esteem? – The themes of histrionic disorders and most personality disorders belong here.

To 3.4 Relation to greater contexts: Where do I/we feel needed in our surrounding world? What change claims this specific situation? What should be realized in my life? What am I born for? Where should I integrate myself? What do I see as the meaning of this situation – of my life? – The theme of suicide and dependence is strongly connected to this dimension.

All these dimensions (like security; emotionality; morality, authenticity, limitations; meanings) should be treated theoretically by EP and practically by EP and EPT under the viewpoint of *conditions for their being, development and improvement* and in *dialogue* with existential philosophy, pedagogy, sociology, theology, medicine and other fields of psychology etc.

4. Methodological remark

The aim of EP and EPT being to reach the individuals in the midst of their Lebenswelt claims for a specific method. The only one suitable for that purpose is the one which enables to encounter the person and makes visible their essence. The essence of a human being can not be measured; but it can be "brought into light" ("erhellen"). No system, no interpretation does justice to the autonomy and Eigen-value (Eigenwert) of the person; it deserves high respect.

With such an impact on the phenomenological and qualitative research methods a permanent question will be around about the importance of quantitative methods. I see in them a supplement measuring on another level than the essential one. The object of its consideration

lies on the effects and numerical outcomes within a personal existence. This may nevertheless be helpful for certain questions with a clear restriction of its interpretation.

I join this new community with my enthusiasm hoping that this journal will be a platform for a fruitful and inspiring exchange which will help to promote this very fine access to the human being and its realisation in existence.

Literature:

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