The Journal provides a forum for the analysis of existence from philosophical and psychological perspectives. It is published biannually. Contributions are invited in areas of philosophical and psychological theory, case studies, discussion papers, book reviews and letters. The opinions expressed by authors of the papers and reviews published are those of the authors themselves, and not necessarily those of the editors, the editorial board, or members of The Society for Existential Analysis.
Existential Analysis
32.2

Journal of The Society for Existential Analysis

Edited by:
Prof Simon du Plock
Dr Martin Adams

July 2021
CONTENTS

Editorial 187

A Box of Darkness: Transforming the experience of existential loss 189
Chris Goto-Jones

A Discussion of Workplace Bullying: Its impact on the sense of self from an existential phenomenological perspective, and implications for existential clinical practice 201
Maria Galani

The Importance of Existential Courage in Experiencing Boundary Situations 210
Rafał Miętkiewicz

Phoebus Ebbini & Neil Lamont

The Eight Tensions Framework: An existential-phenomenological analysis of the tensions of undergraduate life 231
Natalie Lancer & Virginia Eatough

A Year of the Pandemic: Existential themes for psychotherapists 250
Claire Spiller

An Exploration of Some Connections Between Existentialism, Education and Psychotherapy Teaching 262
Martin Adams

What Does It Mean to ‘Teach Existentially’, and How Can We Teach Existentialism Existentially 278
Simon du Plock, Martin Adams & Rosemary Lodge

‘Schizophrenia’ in the Echo Chamber 293
Rachel Noar

Working With Power in Existential Therapy 309
Paul Overend

De-colonising My Trans Body: Fanon and the masks I have worn 322
Daniel Benjamin Jones

Thinking Aloud
Bad Faith: Inequality and discrimination within UK healthcare regulation 333
Dominic Macqueen

Book Reviews 346
EDITORIAL

Welcome to this, the second edition of the thirty-second volume of *Existential Analysis*, which opens with three further papers from the 2020 Society for Existential Analysis Conference. Each author engages with the Conference theme, ‘This Is Not What I Had Planned’, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in a different way. Chris Goto-Jones’ paper provides an episodic narrative case study informed by philosophical counselling, while Maria Galani explores the phenomenon of workplace bullying – a phenomenon which she argues has become more frequent during the pandemic, especially in digital workplaces. Rafał Miętkiewicz discusses the use of the concept of a ‘boundary situation’ in existential therapy, reminding us that the pandemic is only one more example of a boundary situation.

We follow these papers with three research-based contributions. Phoebus Ebbini and Neil Lamont describe an IPA study of the meaning gay men on pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) make of their sexuality; Natalie Lancer and Virginia Eatough also use IPA, this time to undertake an exploration of the experience of personal growth among university students. They develop what they call the Eight Tensions Framework, which they suggest is potentially useful and relevant to professionals beyond the HE context who view their clients as students of life. Claire Spiller returns to the theme of the COVID-19 pandemic in her paper, in which she expands on a number of existential themes which she initially expounded in the course of her collaboration with researchers on the project ‘The challenges and experiences of psychotherapists working remotely during the coronavirus pandemic’, completed in 2020. She includes an invitation to interested readers who may wish to contribute to further exploration of how existential practitioners are responding to existential crisis. As Editors we are glad to encourage readers to engage with authors in order to promote debate and research related to any aspect of existential-phenomenological theory and therapeutic practice.

Much has been written on existential therapeutic practice but, curiously, nothing until now has been written on existential pedagogy. This issue has two papers on the subject. The first, by Martin Adams, looks at the connections between existentialism, education and psychotherapy teaching. The second, by Simon du Ploc, Martin Adams and Rosemary Lodge, arose out of a discussion the editors had with Rosemary Lodge and Zoe Gelis about their paper in the last issue. The starting point was an editorial request to clarify an exercise they had done. This led to a realisation of a shared but undiscussed preoccupation with teaching existential therapy. The resulting paper is a discussion and elucidation of some of the issues. As with Spiller’s paper, the article concludes with a request for more research.

The next paper, by Rachel Noar, concerns the way in which, without
external input, existential conceptualisations of schizophrenia can easily become constrained and polarised. Noar calls for greater communication with contemporary psychiatry.

Paul Overend’s paper explores the nature and use of power in the therapeutic relationship, while Daniel Jones, starting from a first person perspective, explores the meaning of the trans experience with respect to its implications for therapeutic practice.

Our last paper is another of our occasional and polemical ‘Thinking Aloud’ pieces, in which Dominic Macqueen explores the ethics and practice of fitness-to-practice regulation.

This edition closes, as usual, with a number of stimulating and thought-provoking book reviews.

It has been our practice in recent years to vary the cover of each issue. Because of world events we made the cover of the last issue represent the possibility of a tabula rasa, out of which the world could possibly choose a new path. In the short time since then we have seen little that changes that view. The pandemic shows little sign of disappearing, neither does the need for action on climate change. Accordingly we have kept the same cover for this issue.

Prof Simon du Plock
Dr Martin Adams
A Box of Darkness: Transforming the experience of existential loss

Presentation given at the Society for Existential Analysis Annual Conference, London, 14 November 2020

Chris Goto-Jones

Abstract

In the form of an episodic narrative case study, this article explores the transformation of an existential crisis into a form of awakening to a new lifeworld. Circling around a mysterious ‘box of darkness’, we navigate between modern poetry, early Buddhist texts and contemporary philosophy.

Key Words

Trauma, existential crisis, meaning vacuum, Buddhism, apocalypse, lifeworld, transformation

Episode 1: The Gift of Darkness

Clearly uncomfortable, Elliot stood in the doorway and hesitated. The door was open, but perhaps the way was still closed. He spent a few moments looking at his feet, as though disbelieving that they weren’t moving forward. Eventually, his brow furrowed. It looked like effort was being written into his face. He even bit his upper lip. And then, finally, he took the step into my office. Sometimes just showing up is the greatest accomplishment of all.

Elliot had contacted me a couple of weeks earlier by email. His writing was tentative and vague. He explained that he had never been to therapy before but that ‘recent events’ had made him think that he needed some help. As a philosophical counsellor, I have a particular scope of practice, so I asked him if he could say a little more about his situation. It took him a couple of days to respond (with an apology for taking ‘so long’ to reply). He explained that he was aware of my practice and he was confident that I was the right person with whom he should talk. But he didn’t share any more details about ‘recent events’. A few more days passed and then he wrote again. This time he explained that he had thought of contacting me because he had heard me give a lecture in which I cited the poem ‘The Uses of Sorrow’ by Mary Oliver, and that poem had been stuck in his head ever since. Instead of explaining his situation further, he quoted the poem in his email:
Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness. It took me years to understand that this, too, was a gift.

(2006: 52)

I have certainly talked about this remarkable little poem quite often, and it sometimes comes to mind in sessions with clients who have experienced some form of pain or injustice, especially when that suffering seems to have been inflicted on them by someone they cared about or trusted. In my mind, it is a poem that points towards the idea that even the darkest experiences, crises and betrayals can be transformed into gifts, even if that transformation might take us a long time to understand. I assumed from his email that Elliot’s ‘recent events’ might have something to do with this ‘box full of darkness’, and I agreed to meet him.

When, finally, he made it into my office, fidgeting and nervous, the first words out of Elliot’s mouth were, “I’m so sorry”. It wasn’t immediately clear to me why he should be feeling sorry, or why he might feel the need to apologise to me. It turned out that he was sorry that it had taken him a few days to reply to my emails. And then he was also sorry to have been so “indirect” in his responses. And, finally, he was sorry (in advance) that he’d probably not be very good at “this”; presumably ‘this’ was our counselling session.

Even within that first session it was clear that Elliot had turned in on himself. His confidence was gone. He doubted himself at every turn, constantly feeling that he was doing something wrong. He described himself as a sudden recluse, shying away from company. Any company. He was having surreal nightmares. He talked about having lost himself. He used the term ‘vacuum’ to describe his heart, “like it has been hollowed out”. As though reading from Viktor Frankl, he described himself as grappling with a “crisis of meaning”.

When sitting in an encounter of this intensity, sometimes I find it best simply to wait. A favourite phrase in such moments (popularly, but probably apocryphally, attributed to the Buddha): ‘Don’t just do something, sit there!’ So after a few breaths and a couple of minutes of silence, Elliot finally gave voice to his fears: “You’re going to ask me what happened, aren’t you? You’re going to ask about the box full of darkness.”

“Elliot, I’m not going to force you to talk about anything. You made the choice to come here today, which I recognise immediately as deeply courageous. So I know there is something you do want to talk about. If ‘what happened’ isn’t that thing, then perhaps you can say a little more about what you’d like to discuss?”

It turned out that Elliot had reached out to some other therapists, but that they had declined to work with him because he had announced at the
outset that he didn’t want to rehearse the contents of his ‘box of darkness’. Evidently, he had been told that they couldn’t help him if he was going to hide his problems in a ‘black box’. One of them even quoted the well-known AA adage, “You know, Elliot, we’re only as sick as our secrets.” Another had told him during their pre-consultation phone-call that his reluctance to engage was “a clear sign that you’re suffering from PTSD” and they referred him to a psychiatrist for medication. As he told these stories, I could see Elliot’s already fragile composure cracking even more.

“I’m so sorry you had those experiences, Elliot. I understand that they were upsetting. So, what is it you want…?” I almost added “to talk about” but then realised that the shorter version of the question was the right one. It was pretty clear that ‘talking about’ was not his goal, it was not what he wanted at this point. However, the fact that he was here now showed that he understood that talking would probably be a necessary step.

“I want to understand that ‘this, too, was a gift’.” He looked straight into my eyes with a kind of fierce desperation. “I want to know how to find meaning in the ruins.”

**Episode 2: The Poisoned Arrow**

Although it felt rather unusual to be speaking around rather than into ‘what happened’ to Elliot, it seemed very important simply to create a safe space for him to speak at all, so I was willing to leave that ‘box full of darkness’ in the dark, at least for now. I explained to him that my practice is not to analyse the past but to help him find meaning in the present in order to help him move forward into a future that feels authentic for him. In an attempt to help him feel what that might mean, I introduced him to the *Cula-Malunkyovada Sutta* (*The Shorter Instructions to Malunkya*). This text is sometimes known by the popular title *The Teaching On the Poisoned Arrow* since it pivots around the story of a man who is shot by a poisoned arrow. The Buddha is trying to explain to Malunkya that the purpose of the *dhamma* (Buddha’s teachings) is not to reveal the objective truth about the world around us, but rather it is simply supposed to help us live in this world with less dis-ease and suffering. The Buddha laments how so many of us spend our lives asking the wrong questions, and thus we die without ever having genuinely human insight. One of the great obstacles to our liberation is that we don’t even understand what kind of a thing ‘liberation’ is, so we quest for it in all the wrong ways.

In this light, the Buddha tells Malunkya, “It’s just as if a man were wounded with an arrow thickly smeared with poison”. Although his friends and loved ones will immediately provide him with a surgeon to remove the arrow, the muddle-headed man insists that he will not have the arrow removed until he understands everything about it. He wants to know who fired the arrow, what they looked like, and where they were from. He wants...
to know from what kind of bow it was fired from and of what that bow was made. He wants to know how the arrow was constructed and what materials were used. In other words, the wounded man thinks that there is some form of objective truth about the arrow that can be known – and perhaps there is. However, to paraphrase the Buddha’s delicate dryness, who cares about the objective truth of this arrow? Because he has been pierced by a poisoned arrow “the man would die and those things would still remain unknown to him”. Trying to understand the ‘truth’ will literally kill this man; sometimes, we just have to remove the arrow and treat the wound. Expending our time and energy on the wrong questions is worse for us than doing nothing at all.

Elliot immediately saw the point of this little story and it seemed to help him to relax into our conversations. It seemed to ease the pressure. At the same time, he was willing to accept that there were a couple of aspects of his wound that we might benefit from understanding better (such as the shape of the arrow-head and the type of poison) but that we didn’t need to spend lots of time analysing everything about it.

After some gentleness, carefulness and openness, I began to get a sense of some of the features of Elliot’s wound. Not exactly the contents of his box, but perhaps the dimensions and textures of it in his present experience. He talked about betrayal and a loss of trust in people around him. He talked about how that loss sent him tumbling into another loss: the loss of his way of being in the world. That is, his basic assumptions about the nature of the world in which he lived had been ‘destroyed’. In other words, he no longer felt properly equipped to understand the world because he felt that his way of thinking about it, including his basic sense of its logic and composition, had been undermined. He was encountering this abrupt epistemological uncertainty as a form of existential anguish – like Malunkya’s arrow, ‘recent events’ had injected a kind of poison that was working its way through his mind.

While Elliot assured me that he had not been the victim of physical violence, his experience certainly seemed to meet many of the criteria of ‘trauma’. However, he was unwilling to view himself through the lens of that word; he felt that it should be reserved for people who experienced psychical violence or war. While he seemed to accept that trauma can arise from any “event that is outside the range of usual human experience” (DSM III, 1987),³ he was reluctant to step outside a form of comparative trauma-calculus; other people’s experiences were more physically violent than his, so his experiences didn’t really count. After his abortive interactions with previous therapists, he was also very wary of being referred to a psychiatrist for trauma treatment. He wanted to talk to me, hoping for insight and hope rather than analysis and treatment. So, in the end, we agreed to talk about ‘crisis’ and ‘anguish’ rather than ‘trauma’.
Philosophical counselling often approaches issues conceptually, seeking to encourage clients to re-think their issues from the ground up, perhaps with the aid of a specific philosophical text or texts. In this case, I gradually introduced Elliot to the work of Susan Brison (2002). Her remarkable book is a sophisticated, powerful and raw exploration of how she survived the trauma of rape and near murder. The uniqueness and violence of Brison’s trauma could (and should) not be compared to Elliot’s experience, and yet he immediately recognised some of her language as expressing his own anguish. In particular, he recognised that, in the aftermath of ‘recent events’, “things had stopped making sense… Had my reasoning broken down? Or was it the breakdown of reason? I couldn’t explain what had happened to me” (ibid: ix).

While considering the tendency of survivors to blame themselves for what happened to them even when they bear no responsibility for it, Brison describes what she calls the “potentially lethal lie” that many of us have internalised: “If you don’t do anything wrong, if you’re just careful enough, you’ll be safe?” (ibid: 4). This ‘potentially lethal lie’ also casts its shadow into Buddhist philosophy, where the concept of karma is often misrepresented as meaning that our present difficulties are all caused by our previous actions (in this life or in previous incarnations), hence on some level we deserve whatever happens to us. However, as Mark Epstein (2013) correctly observes, the Buddha “explicitly rejected such a naïve view of karma”. In fact, it is a form of delusional vanity to think that we are responsible for (or in control of) everything that happens to us. The Buddha suggest that perhaps “one in eight” difficulties are caused by our own karma, but the vast majority are caused by other people, by natural processes or sometimes even by freak, random events. In other words, this belief that we are somehow in control of or responsible for everything that happens to us risks triggering an existential crisis when something horrible happens that we can’t explain. In Brison’s (2002: xii) powerful words, “trauma shatters one’s most fundamental assumptions about the world, including beliefs about our ability to control what happens to us”.

As we have already seen, for Elliot one of the most challenging aspects of his life now was the collapse of his confidence in his understanding of the way the world works. He had been doing the right things, but doing the right things had not prevented him from being given ‘a box full of darkness’ by someone (or someones) he had cared about. That is, his world of meaning had suffered a kind of epistemic apocalypse, leaving him struggling to work out ‘how to find meaning in the ruins’. In Brison’s (ibid: 4) words, Elliot had developed “seemingly justified scepticism about everyone and everything” which had in turn destroyed his ability to feel “at home in the world”. This radical uncertainty about the world in which we live is not only an epistemological crisis but also risks the “disintegration of the self” and challenges “our notions of personal identity over time”.

A Box of Darkness: Transforming the experience of existential loss
Episode 3: The Apocalypse of Awakening

Accepting that we can never be completely safe, the feeling of being ‘at home in the world’ involves feeling some measure of safety, even if that means simply that we are able to understand and anticipate sources of danger. If something happens that doesn’t fit within our parameters of comprehension, then it can feel like an earthquake or a home invasion. At the very least, our home is violated and we must work to re-establish our comfort in it afterwards, whether that is done by opening it up in responsive new ways or by battening it down. However, such an attack on our home might also shatter our sense of belonging in the world altogether, rendering us into aliens in our own lives, leaving us feeling profoundly (and existentially) unsafe in a world that literally makes no sense to us. If something earth-shattering could happen so inexplicably, how can we know that something else won’t happen right…now? The situation is something akin to an existential and experiential version of a Kuhnian paradigm shift.

Elliot had told me that he wanted “to know how to find meaning in the ruins”. To some extent, his situation suggested a ‘meaning vacuum’ of the kind discussed by Viktor Frankl, who famously maintained that, no matter what circumstances or crises we experience, “everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way… Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom” (1992: xx).

Along similar lines, although less willfully directed, the Sallatha Sutta seeks to draw a basic distinction between human experiences of pain and the all-too-human tendency to automatically ascribe meanings and interpretations to that pain, thus causing ourselves additional suffering. This additional suffering is unnecessary and avoidable if only we can cultivate the ability to ‘disjoin’ ourselves from the objective pain. This does not mean that the pain of, say, being shot by an arrow will vanish. Being shot hurts. However, it does mean that when “sensing a feeling of pain, he senses it disjoined from it” and thus avoids ruminations, blame, anger, (self-)recrimination and other responses that make us feel worse. In the Buddha’s words, the “well-instructed” person is “disjoined from birth, ageing and death; from sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses and despairs. He is disjoined, I tell you, from suffering and stress.” This ‘disjoining’ enables, in Frankl’s words, “our growth and our freedom”.

On some level, then, Elliot had the choice to re-signify the reality of living in the ruins. Rather than seeing them as evidence of the destruction of previously grand buildings or edifices, he might decide that the ruins are beautiful in their own terms, just as they are. Rather than striving to
restore or rebuild what was there before, Elliot might decide to live amongst the ruins themselves. Not everything that is broken can be mended, and not everything that is broken needs to be mended. There are ruins of castles, cathedrals and lost cities all over the world that are perfectly authentic in their ruined states. Could Elliot feel at home in the post-apocalyptic ruins?

We spent quite some time considering the meaning of ‘apocalypse’ and ‘post-apocalypse’. While humbly self-conscious about the melodramatic language, Elliot seemed able to think about the destruction of his previous ‘life world’ as a form of apocalypse. Indeed, he seemed to see his situation in exactly these terms; it wasn’t only that something about him and his identity had been damaged, but it was also the case that the reason and workings of the world itself had been transformed.

In this context, we took some time to consider how many trauma survivors talk in terms of a form of personal death and then perhaps a form of rebirth or life after death. Of course, Viktor Frankl was not the only survivor of the concentration camps to write about his experiences; in *Auschwitz and After*, the remarkable Charlotte Delbo famously explained that “I died in Auschwitz, but no one knows it” (1995: 267). Brison frames similar sentiments when she says:

*Perhaps I’m not really here, I thought, perhaps I did die in that ravine. The line between life and death, once so clear and sustaining, now seemed carelessly drawn and easily erased... I felt as though I’d somehow outlived myself.*

(2002: 9)

But while Elliot found some resonance with the idea that something important about (or within) him had died as a result of his experience, his sense of the boundaries between his ‘self’ and the world around him was rather more fluid than this idea seems to suggest. That is, it wasn’t only that he had been transformed in some way, but it was also the case that the world itself had been transformed. For Elliot, as for a range of existential and phenomenological thinkers (including many Buddhists), there was no clear duality between himself and the world. Transforming one immediately and already transforms the other, at least for all practical purposes. This non-dual lifeworld is an integrated subject. A lifeworld crisis involves architectonic forces; rather than the death and afterdeath of an individual self in the world, Elliot saw the destruction of an entire world. It was an apocalypse.

This notion of the permeability and continuity of the individual self with the world around it is a feature of the Buddhist tradition. Indeed, to some extent, the realisation that the self is not self-sufficient is a principle feature of ‘awakening’ or ‘enlightenment’, especially in the Mahāyāna traditions. The awakened ones (like the Buddha himself) appear to go on living in
the same mundane world as the rest of us, yet they are actually living in a lifeworld that is radically transformed by their realisation of its true, non-dual nature. That is, the self and the world are transformed as one, at least for them.

In this respect, it is worth recalling the original meaning of ‘apocalypse’ before it became associated with Christian millenarianism. As Buddhist philosopher David Loy (2001: 1) reminds us, “literally, an apocalypse is ‘an uncovering’, the disclosure of something hidden”. Elliot was immediately taken with the idea that his gift of darkness could have been an apocalyptic revelation or awakening.

**Episode 4: Ruined Enclaves of Meaning**

One of the most famous stories about the life of the Buddha concerns his early life, before he was awakened. It is said that he was Siddhartha Gautama, a prince of the Shakya peoples in a Himalayan kingdom on the borders of what are now Nepal and India. He lived a life of splendour and ease in his father’s palace – a life of archetypal privilege. It is said that his life was so privileged and sheltered that he was ignorant even of the concept of suffering. But then, one day, venturing outside his enclave of privilege, he suddenly came face-to-face with aspects of life he had never before encountered: a sick person, an ageing person and a corpse. Even worse, when he asked his servants what these things were, he learned that they were all inevitable features of human life – they would also happen to him. There was no escape.

Leaving aside the question of the historical veracity of this story, its purpose as a teaching tale is clear enough. This was an apocalyptic moment for the young prince; it disclosed previously hidden truths about the world. In those simple encounters, his epistemic and ontic enclaves were exploded; his trust in the structures of knowledge in which he had been schooled was destroyed and his faith in the people who had obscured this truth from him was undermined. While this was not his ‘awakening’ (ie. he did not immediately see through to the meaning of this new world), this was his wake-up call. While not yet able to grasp the meaning of his new world, his old one was irrevocably ruined. To throw some anachronistic language at it, this traumatic experience set up the conditions for (but did not itself constitute) his post-traumatic growth. Indeed, we might even say that his eventual awakening was the gift hidden in that box full of darkness.

Elliot was fascinated by the possibility that his ‘recent events’ (ie. his own personal apocalypse) might contain the seeds of his eventual awakening. To help him think his way through this possibility, I asked him to read an essay by José Luis Reissig, in which he posits the idea that we all live in ‘enclosures’ of our own construction. He suggests that such enclosures
have a kind of centripetal force, holding us within them even when our best interests might be served by escaping. Our minds are subtle and sophisticated creatures, able to convince us that our little enclosures are good or safe places for us, even if this requires our self-deception. In a potent and poetic turn, Reissig describes going for a run in Riverside Park:

*I came upon a couple sitting next to a cage with the door open and a bird inside. They told me that they wanted to give the bird its freedom. As I came back from my run thirty minutes later, they were still trying to persuade the bird to fly away. I couldn’t get the image of that bird out of my mind. I had lived a lot of my life as that bird, unwilling even to acknowledge my confinement, unaware that my condition was unsatisfactory.*

(2004: 51)

Rather than coaxing or even reasoning or our way out, the necessary centrifugal forces are usually provided by dramatic or traumatic events. In Reissig’s own case, “there was one enclave I could not make good by deception, and that was my marriage. Its failure eventually brought down the whole project of my life” (ibid: 53). However, as he began to work through this existential loss, Reissig contrasts the “sense of excruciating doom” that he used to feel when the critical structures of his identity (or his cage) were threatened before his apocalyptic moment with the “uncanny sense of freedom” (ibid: 54) that permeated his life after he discovered that he could let go of those enclosures.

At the end of our discussion of Reissig’s essay, Elliot started weeping. I passed him the tissues but simply held a safe space for his tears in silence. After a while he composed himself again, looked up at me, smiled faintly, and the apologised for “being so silly”. I reassured him that there is nothing silly about crying, but I also asked him what the tears were for – it was the first time he had cried in front of me. He smiled sadly again. “I’m realising that I’m not angry or resentful or scared. I’m just grieving the loss of the world I used to know. And, if I’m honest now, as I reflect on what that world was like, I think I’m also realising that it wasn’t a very healthy one anyway. So, I think I’m also feeling something like compassion for the ‘me’ who sealed himself into that world.” He paused. “Perhaps this is ‘uncanny freedom’?”

**Episode 5: Funeral for a Lost World**

Grief seemed much more manageable than trauma, crisis, or existential devastation. And, in our final session, Elliot and I talked about grieving and rituals of grief. We wondered aloud about how to grieve for a lost ‘world’. Where would we need to stand in order to speak the obituary? What kind of honour or privilege might it be to speak the death of a lifeworld?
One sticking point for Elliot was the question of who should be invited to this fictional, fantasy funeral. While he was ready to grieve the death of a lost world, he was not yet ready to introduce other people into his new lifeworld. He was not sure he wanted to tell them anything; it was not clear to him that they cared, or that they deserved to be there, or that they were worthy of his trust. Despite his declaration that he was not feeling resentment, he was clearly wrestling with resentment towards the friends and colleagues who “just stood by and watched it happen to me – they did nothing”. In fact, he wondered whether ‘trust’ and ‘friendship’ were aspects of the lost world. If he was grieving their loss, how could they also attend the funeral?

In *Aftermath*, Brison discusses people who fail to help when they could have helped. She talks about how she can be triggered into flashbacks in which she is “alone again in the ravine, dying, screaming. And still no one could hear me. Or, worse, they heard me, but refused to help” (2002: 16). Yet, Brison’s remarkable and compassionate voice also offers understanding towards these bystanders who played such a role in her terrible ordeal. She suggests that people are “caught up in the myth of their own immunity” (ibid: 9), hence they dare not look upon the trauma of others lest doing so might force them out of their own little enclosures. By extension, she explains that many people expressed the view that what happened to her must have been at least partially her fault, that she somehow asked for it. Rather than allowing this to fill her with hatred for those people, Brison again offers compassionate understanding, suggesting that these people are using their suspicions as ways to bolster their enclosures:

*They cannot allow themselves to imagine the victim’s shattered life, or else their illusions about their own safety and control over their lives might begin to crumble.*

(ibid)

Although Brison’s account helped Elliot to understand that those people who let him down were somewhat akin to the caged bird in the park, watching the world outside its cage and pretending that those events had nothing to do with it, which meant (by his own admission) that they were also just like the lost Elliot himself; he was not yet able to extend his compassion to them. He admired Brison’s insight and compassion, and he recognised that such a move was rather like taking the Bodhisattva vow to dedicate himself to freeing all beings of their delusions as a crucial aspect of his own freedom – nobody can be free of cages until everybody is free of cages. This was a step too far for Elliot at this stage. However, it planted the seed for a project moving forward.
Conclusion: No Mud, No Lotus

In the end, Elliot seemed to emerge from these conversations with a sense that his box full of darkness was not only a crisis or a trauma, but was also an apocalypse. Ironically, this felt better. He came to me searching for ‘meaning in the ruins’ and he worked hard to find ways to see the ruination of a previous lifeworld as a kind of awakening into a new, emerging one. He could see that his box of darkness served as a wake-up call, even if not an actual awakening, which enabled him to reassess the nature of what he had lost in terms of the new freedoms he had gained. This, in turn, enabled an emotional and cognitive shift from debilitating anxiety into grief for the death of a lost world of meaning, and the seeding of a new world.

Along the way, we navigated the unusual dilemma of Elliot’s refusal fully to unpack his box of darkness, so the details of whatever disaster had befallen him remained largely hidden on the black box recorder. While we found a reassuring way to deal with this and actually integrated that process into the progression of our conversations, I remain somewhat concerned that he might need or want to open that box at some point in the future – I remain in touch with him. That said, the significance and even the meaning of ‘recent events’ could be considered through their impact on Elliot’s life, emotions and thoughts. Rather than analysing a potential trauma (which Elliot had already refused), we focused instead on how to live on in the aftermath of an apocalypse.

In the end, Elliot expressed a willingness to grieve for his loss and he even wrote a moving eulogy for his lost world. He expressed the emergence of hope about his new world, recognising that a wake-up call is also a call for action, not an awakening in itself. He shared excitement about being able to fashion his new ‘enclosure’ in a more conscious way, as well as the aspiration to attempt to live in a way that might liberate him from enclosures altogether. That is, the meaning he found in the ruins concerns self-responsibility and freedom. And his first concrete task is to find a way to allow other people into his emerging world, rather than immediately creating an enclosure with space only for him. His working hypothesis is that the compassion he found for himself is also the seed that will grow compassion even for those who wronged him.

In our very last conversation, Elliot and I returned to Mary Oliver’s poem. I asked him about his ‘box full of darkness’ and whether he was beginning to see how it might have been a gift. He smiled more broadly than I had ever seen him do and said, “Oh yes. When I open that box now, I see that it is a box of seeds. They are the seeds from which I will grow my new world. I have been given the gift of life itself”. In return, I offered him these words from Thich Nhat Hanh:
Most people are afraid of suffering. But suffering is a kind of mud to help the lotus flower of happiness grow. There can be no lotus flower without the mud.

(2014: 5)

Chris Goto-Jones (DPhil, Oxford) is a certified Philosophical Counsellor, diplomate in Logotherapy and Existential Analysis, and certified facilitator of mindfulness-based interventions (MBSR, MBCT). He is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Victoria.

Contact: chrisgotojones@uvic.ca

Endnotes
1. This is a common standpoint in logotherapeutic approaches.
3. DSM V (2013) no longer includes this clause.

References
A Discussion of Workplace Bullying: Its impact on the sense of self, from an existential phenomenological perspective, and implications for existential clinical practice

Presentation given at the Society for Existential Analysis Annual Conference, London, 14 November 2020

Maria Galani

Abstract

This paper focuses on enabling existential therapists to better understand the phenomenon of workplace bullying, explore its complex nature from an existential-phenomenological perspective, and its implications for existential clinical practice. It is deemed important for existential therapists to consider this as a phenomenon that can cause existential anxiety in a person’s life and great change. Furthermore, this paper will explore the complexity of workplace bullying, with a focus on the existential-phenomenological paradigm, and the implications for existential clinical practice.

Key Words

Workplace bullying, subjective-phenomenological experience, existential clinical practice, identity, existential change

Introduction

This paper focuses on the subjective phenomenological exploration of the phenomenon of workplace bullying and its implications for existential clinical practice. I will talk about the definition of workplace bullying and the impact of workplace bullying on an individual’s sense of self. Furthermore, there will be an emphasis on the existential-phenomenological perspective of the impact of workplace bullying on the individual’s identity. In particular, there will be a focus on the positioning of existential therapy in exploring the subjective experiences of clients who have experienced bullying in the workplace, and what this means for the existential clinical practice.

Terminology and the Concept of Workplace Bullying

The study of interpersonal bullying in the workplace emerged in Scandinavia in the eighties with the work of Heinz Leymann, who used the term ‘mobbing’ to describe the phenomenon. In the UK, the journalist Andrea
Adams, in collaboration with the psychologist Neil Crawford, proposed the bullying phenomenon to the public through radio broadcasts around 1992 (Adams & Crawford, 2014). She described the term ‘bullying’ as a variety of negative acts that employees could be exposed to, regardless of differences in age, sex, position and so on. As an outcome of her work, the study of bullying became better known in the UK.

Bullying at work means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone, or negatively affecting someone’s work tasks. In order for the label bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction, or process, it has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g. weekly) and over a period of time (e.g. about six months). Bullying is an escalated process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts.

(Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2011: 22)

Definitions of Workplace Bullying

Definitions of workplace bullying or ‘mobbing’ commonly affirm that the exposure occurs over an extended period and is accompanied by a power imbalance (whether structural or social) between the instigators and their targets. Due to variation in the conceptualisation of workplace bullying, researchers in different nations have used varied definitions of bullying (Rai & Agarwal, 2017).

Different terms have been used to describe workplace bullying. These include: mobbing (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011); employee emotional abuse/emotional abuse (Keashly, 1998); abusive supervision (Tepper, 2007); ostracism (Williams, 2007); social undermining (Duffy, Ganster & Pagon, 2002); and workplace harassment (Einarsen, et. al, 2011). Workplace bullying is a phenomenon that is deemed as a distinctive and particularly destructive form of aggression at the workplace (Neilsen & Einarsen, 2018).

Forms of Workplace Bullying

Workplace bullying can take different forms such as verbal, physical, social or psychological (Arnout, et. al, 2019). Physical bullying can be defined by beating, kicking, punching and so on.

According to Rayner and Cooper (1997), workplace bullying can take other forms such as: threat to professional status (for example, belittling opinions; public professional humiliation; and accusations regarding lack of effort); threat to personal identity (for example, name calling; insults; intimidation; and devaluing with reference to age or any other personal
criteria); isolation (for example, preventing access to opportunities; physical or social isolation; and withholding of information); excessive overwork (for example, applying undue pressure; setting of impossible deadlines; and unnecessary disruptions); destabilisation (for example, failure to give credit when due; meaningless tasks; removal of responsibility; repeated reminder of blunders; and setting one up to fail).

Social bullying can take different forms such as: disrupting interpersonal relationship with others or excluding colleagues from their normal work duties or discarding them; degrading employee’s reputation by publishing pictures; rumours and inaccurate reports against others; or writing publications against employees that offend and impair the respect of others. This can occur either face-to-face or on social media, email and text messages. (Arnout, et. al, 2019).

Workplace bullying not only occurs within the closed environment of an organisation but also is present within the virtual world, where it is called ‘cyber bullying’ (Bolling, 2019). The term was first cited in Bill Belsey’s work (Campbell, 2005). Cyberbullying is characterised as “inappropriate, unwanted social exchange behaviours initiated by a perpetrator via online or wireless communication technology and devices” (Piotrowski, 2012). The perpetrator uses technological applications (such as social media, emails, text messages) to harass or bully the other (Snyman & Loh, 2015). According to recent research (D’Souza N, Forsyth D, Tappin D, et. al, 2018), workplace cyberbullying behaviour can be defined as “(involving) perceived unwanted or aggressive behaviour(s) perpetrated at any time through electronic media, that may harm, threaten, or demoralise the intended target(s) of this behaviour(s)”.

**Risk of Cyberbullying and COVID-19**

It is worth mentioning that due to the anonymity involved in the electronic communication platforms, cyberbullying may emerge as a more tempting form of victimisation (Doxbeck, 2020). Just like conventional face-to-face bullying, cyberbullying is linked to increased levels of stress, worse job performance and less job satisfaction (Snyman & Loh, 2015). Cyberbullying research initially focused on experiences of children and young people being bullied via electronic platforms (Katzer, Fetchenhauer & Belschak, 2009).

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many organisations asked their employees to work from home. There has not been enough research yet on the link between COVID-19 and workplace cyberbullying. A recent study shows that there has been a rise in cyberbullying during the pandemic (Karmakar & Das, 2021). It is important to consider the role of existential therapists when working with clients who have experienced workplace bullying, and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and the implications for existential clinical practice.
Impact of Workplace Bullying On the Sense of Self

Accumulative exposure to workplace bullying can result in severe psychological trauma, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, feelings of burnout, somatisation and negative self-perceptions (Neilsen & Einarsen 2012), and in some cases post-traumatic stress (Garaigordobil, 2015). A recent review of the research literature on workplace bullying (Neilsen & Einarsen, 2018) demonstrated that it had an impact not only on the mental health but also on work-related behaviours of the person being bullied, which can include the intent to leave, lack of commitment, job dissatisfaction and absenteeism.

Low self-esteem, poor self-confidence, decreased self-worth, self-hatred, sleep problems, nervousness, insecurity, suspicion, bitterness, concentration difficulties, chronic fatigue and various somatic problems, as well as suicidal thoughts, are commonly reported amongst individuals who were targets of workplace bullying (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003).

Subjective-phenomenological Perspective of the Impact of Workplace Bullying On the Sense of Self

As existential therapists, we are interested in exploring the subjective experiences of our clients without making assumptions. Although there are a great many quantitative studies on the impact of workplace bullying on mental health, there is less research available using qualitative studies focusing on the individual’s subjective experience related to the phenomenon.

Phenomenology stems from the Greek word *phenomenon* which means to show itself, to put into light or to manifest something that can become visible in itself (Heidegger as cited in Ray, 1994). The goal of phenomenology is to describe the universal essence of the lived experiences of several subjects who have experienced the same phenomenon (Husserl, 1970; Heidegger, 1962). The aim of phenomenological qualitative research is to deal with experiences and meanings and “to capture as closely as possible the way in which the phenomenon is experienced within the context in which the experience takes place” (Giorgi, 2007).

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) acknowledges that an individual’s experience cannot be accessed directly and, accordingly, it endeavours to understand an experience by investigating how it is given meaning by the participant (Smith, 2009). IPA therefore entails a ‘double hermeneutic’ whereby “the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world”.

Phenomenological Studies and Subjective Experience of Workplace Bullying

In a recent IPA study (O’Neill & Borland, 2018), it was found that participants who experienced workplace bullying expressed feelings of anger and
worthlessness, loss of trust, symptoms of depression and anxiety. Individuals experienced these as a result of their feelings being minimised by their managers and their organisations.

According to another study (Reknes, Einarsen, Knardahl & Lau, 2014), the subjective experience of workplace bullying ended up weakening the perception of personal safety and the benevolence of others; affected the individual’s perception of the meaning and value of life and control of their future; and led to an increased sense of weakness, worthlessness, fear and anxiety.

According to other phenomenological studies (D’ Cruz & Noronha, 2014), participants who experienced bullying in their workplace ended up questioning their ontological foundations and experienced feelings of isolation, uncertainty, existential loneliness and a sense of meaninglessness. These feelings were found to have an impact on how the person views their own sense of self and identity. Individuals who experienced workplace bullying ended up doubting their own values and the way they view the world.

More recently, in a qualitative-phenomenological study that looked into the subjective experience of workplace bullying in Australia, Ahmad & Sheehan (2017) showed that employees felt a sense of helplessness. Adding to the aftermaths of their subjective experience of being bullied, employees experienced post-traumatic stress, increased levels of alcohol abuse and suicidal thoughts.

These findings suggest it is important for existential therapists to consider the implications to our clinical practice and how we might support clients who experience the impact of workplace bullying as a great change.

**Implications for Existential Clinical Practice**

It has been found that workplace bullying can lead to experiences of existential questioning (Denton & Vann Lill, 2007). In particular, following the analysis of the themes as part of this study, participants reflected that seeking meaning after the experience of being bullied in their workplace was part of their struggle. Existential therapists working with workplace bullying notice that it can lead to an existential crisis for many clients. For instance, existential crisis, known as existential dread, are moments when individuals question whether their lives have meaning, purpose or value. Existential crisis may often be provoked by a significant life event such as personal loss, a traumatic experience, reaching a certain age and so on.

Being bullied in the workplace can lead an individual to question their life meaning and personal values. In *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1946) Viktor Frankl, the founder of Logotherapy, said that “everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances”. He believed that life has meaning in all circumstances, even the most miserable ones. This meant...
that even when situations seem objectively terrible, there is a higher level of order that involves meaning.

Furthermore, according to Frankl’s theory of logotherapy (2006) humans are constantly confronted by what he names the ‘Tragic Triad’. This triad consists of pain, guilt and suffering. As life constantly changes, humans can deal with their existential angst through changing their approach towards how they perceive this triad. For example, if we consider we are encountered with suffering, we may change/adjust our attitude to see ways in which we can grow as a result. Equally, if an individual determines they feel guilty, he or she may accommodate their mind set to see these feelings as a call to action to right a wrong. Finally, Frankl highlighted the idea that individuals may experience pain, for which they can adjust their perceptions to seek growth and meaning as its product.

My Own Experience as an Existential Therapist

Consequently, as an existential therapist, I aim to support clients in rebuilding their life purpose, their autonomy, their self-acceptance. Phenomenologists also recognise that meaning making and building self-autonomy, is one of the defining characteristics of human consciousness (van Deurzen, 2015). For the past three years I have been working in the field of workplace counselling and employee wellbeing. Working with employees who have been bullied in the workplace made me realise that it can be a traumatic experience that can lead to existential anxiety and existential crisis.

Stolorow (2007) understands trauma as “a catastrophic loss of innocence that permanently alters one’s sense of being-in-the-world”. Many clients with whom I worked experienced workplace bullying as traumatic and have had various emotional responses such as: shame; guilt; loss of sense of self; sense of helplessness; powerlessness; and a sense of worthlessness. These feelings seem to have been re-triggered and/or exacerbated during the pandemic, which has proved to be itself a collective traumatic experience.

My clinical experience is in line with the phenomenological research which has shown that individuals who had experienced workplace bullying reported that the aftermath can increase existential isolation and can impact on the individual’s life meaning. Therefore, being bullied in the workplace can evidently constitute a traumatic life change experience which is also in line with phenomenological research (D’Cruz & Noronha, 2012).

Moreover, I was interested in exploring how the COVID-19 pandemic might have impacted more on clients who had experienced workplace bullying before and/or during the pandemic. Whilst we are in the middle of this global pandemic, it is important as existential therapists to support our clients into their meaning-making process when facing experiences of bullying in their workplaces.
In my conference presentation, I asked colleagues to talk about their therapeutic work with clients who had experiences of workplace bullying. It appeared that the majority of participants had a story to share about clients who had experienced it.

**Conclusion**

Workplace bullying is on the rise during COVID-19, especially in digital workplaces. My experience as an existential therapist working with this client group has been that individuals have encountered the experience as life changing and traumatic, especially during social isolation as a result of the pandemic. Our goal remains to support our clients to re-build their life meaning at a time when their existential givens are being challenged. Existential therapy embraces change, uncertainty and human vulnerability, and seems to be a source of help for clients who have experienced uncertainty, existential crises and trauma as a result of being bullied in the workplace.

My hope as an existential therapist is to contribute further to raising awareness of the complexity of workplace bullying and its impact on client’s sense of self.

**Maria Galani** is a registered counsellor. She works as a Clinical Services Coordinator of the Trauma Response Service for an Employee Assistance Program and has a private practice. She has a specialist clinical and research interest in workplace bullying. Maria works towards completing the Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology at NSPC/Middlesex University. Maria has been invited to teach, as a Visiting Psychology Lecturer, at Kingston University London. Contact: mgalanipsych@gmail.com

**References**


Neilsen, M.B. & Einarsen, S. (2018). What we know, what we do not know and what we should and could have known about workplace bullying: An overview of the literature and agenda for future research. Aggression and Violent Behavior. 42: 71-83.
The Importance of Existential Courage in Experiencing Boundary Situations

Presentation given at the Society for Existential Analysis Annual Conference, London, 14 November 2020

Rafał Miętkiewicz

Abstract
At the beginning of the twentieth century, Karl Jaspers introduced the concept of ‘boundary situations’. This paper will explore its use in existential psychotherapy, showing how we all – psychotherapists and patients – can become ourselves by entering into inherent existence and unavoidable boundary situations with existential courage.

Key Words
Existential psychotherapy, courage, boundary situations, Karl Jaspers

A little while ago, my lovely daughter Jasmine was born. That was not what I had planned. Nor had I planned living in a family with two other marvellous kids, Victor and Hania. I had not planned falling in vivid, enriching love with my present wife, Magdalena, either.

Quite the contrary, I saw a lonely path ahead of me. Over the last twenty years, I have been living quite a tranquil and lonely life. Getting up early to do training (being a triathlon and running fan, I used to train around fifteen hours per week ), then seeing patients until evening (with a lunch break and an obligatory nap) and going to bed early, reading and exploring new ideas in existential therapy and psychoanalysis before sleep. I had a few good friends, with whom I met from time to time. But although it took me a while to really face it, my marriage was not thriving. My first wife and I were living under one roof, not colliding, but also not really connecting in our childless marriage. One year led to the next, and before I knew it I was forty, officially in mid-life. I bought a single, one-person light tent for long, lonely bike trips.

So, what has happened? I believe I have personally experienced the ‘boundary situation’ as Jaspers would call it. One autumn day I decided to run a marathon, a street one. The ones I previously ran were always either in the forests or in the mountains. Even today I have no idea what drove me to that decision. A lucky coincidence, as Jaspers would probably say. I do not remember much from the run: just the voice and the eyes: “Will you run this marathon with me,” Magda asked. We ran and talked together the whole distance. I felt weird, like very intensively being there,
physically putting one foot before the other and repeating it endless times, emotionally delving deeper and deeper into Magda’s story about her life and kids, and still my spirit was moving on an axis of time – being a kid myself and the elder – and on the axis of sense. It was like revisiting my whole existence and projecting myself towards the rest of the time I may be alive – the ‘possible existence’, again using Jaspers notion. It soon became apparent to me that something extraordinary and life-changing was happening and that I was responsible for facing the struggle, of which I became aware. A struggle for possible existence, existence filled with love and hope, existence that includes being more than I am today.

Let me pause here in my personal story and delve into Jasper’s philosophy a little. We already have two important concepts here (I will talk about the third one, existential courage, later):

1. **The boundary situation.** Moments, usually accompanied by experiences of dread, guilt or acute anxiety, in which the human mind confronts the restrictions and pathological narrowness of its existing forms, and allows itself to abandon the securities of its limitedness and enter a new realm of self-consciousness. Their constructive feature of a boundary situation is that it cannot be avoided; stumbling upon suffering, struggle, guilt, isolation and death is an obligatory element of every biography. Experiencing these boundary situations apparently throws us outside the protected boundaries of our private world view, which we achieved through hard work, and enables us to touch and feel the other – unconscious until that moment – possible existence. It is important to remember that experiencing these boundary situations, which shakes the foundations of a person’s existence, is not part of daily life. We should always have our eyes and hearts open in search for them. In his work *Psychology*, Jaspers (1971) writes that in order to advent to Being itself, certain boundary situations must be faced. He lists four boundary situations: struggle; death; chance; and guilt.

2. **Struggle.** Commonly associated with the negative behaviour of so-called evil, aggressive people, in fact this inevitably affects everyone. It is caused not only by the pursuit of satisfying basic needs resulting from human biological nature. According to Jaspers ruthless struggle is fought constantly at all levels of life: “In the economic field, peacefully, during violent wars, by means of greater achievements, deceptions and actions that bring harm - as a result, everywhere is fought in an equally cruel way…” (1997: 86).

Another type of struggle is spiritual competition, arising from the movement of ideas, where the motive is not material expansion or the struggle for
survival, but gaining prestige and fame by showing in creative activity the achievements of one’s own personality, and then sharing them with others in mutual respect and a sense of dignity.

The spiritual struggle also includes fighting inside the individual, when he questions a part of himself, his character and his urges; that is, ‘fighting with himself’, as well as his particular way of fighting, and ‘fighting in love’, which is about realising the basis of the personal existence of people in love.

To sum this up, Jaspers (1997) ultimately reduces the forms of fighting between people to two types: (1) fighting with violence, which is destructive, limiting and harmful, and (2) fighting in love, which takes place without the use of violence and the driving force of which is the will to existential realisation.

Jaspers’ idea of a fight is not new. Let us remind ourselves of the ancient vision of Heraclitus (Barnes, 1983), who in battle sees the source of all things, “everything is created by struggle…struggle is universal…it is the father of all things”. Admittedly, Jaspers does not conceive the struggle as a mechanism of dialectical development of reality, as Heraclitus does, but considers it in the context of human fate. However, his vision of a world permeated by battle resembles Heraclitus in this respect, that it also has a total, all-embracing and inevitable character, and like Heraclitus, harmony is only a moment of silence and peace is only a break between wars, an appearance covering the whirling vortex under its surface fighting powers. For Heraclitus, however, the struggle as a mechanism for the development of reality is a creative element, while for Jaspers man struggle is inevitable and unwanted, because, like in Schopenhauer, he sees it to be a conflict arising from the very nature of reality.

Jaspers believed that it is impossible to live without violence, believing that one of the main reasons engaging in the struggle is so hard is that it causes the feeling of guilt. However, the conforming thought is that guilt is also inevitable. This is the aspect of guilt that has to do with not realising or rejecting an opportunity. This kind of guilt can be found in the distant, ancient concept of Anaximander’s **apeiron** (unlimited), where it is woven into a great cosmic metaphor, and in Jaspers it has an existential dimension. In both there is a characteristic approach to the guilt resulting from not using all – let’s add, infinite – possibilities.

**Discussion**

Okay, so what can we gain if we face the struggle? What good can bring us existential courage?

Since meeting Magda during that autumn marathon, not only my life but also the deepest parts of me have utterly changed. We both faced the struggle in quite a vivid but also courageous, I dare to say, manner. After
two months we started to live together – the four of us – Magda plus Victor and Hania, her kids, and me. That was Christmas 2018. In February 2019 we officially engaged and married in the Tatra mountains in summer 2020. As you already know, our cute daughter, Jasmine was born in autumn.

I still remember tough, challenging and often painful moments while saying goodbye to the past life; also, how frightened I was before meeting the kids, as I had not much experience with them before. I have always known, being a therapist, that time and attention is very important in dealing with others...well, kids brought that knowledge to a completely new level. I reduced training to just a few runs per week, spending most of the time with them. We have all opened up to each other and, please trust me, that has not been easy. I guess this is what modern psychology calls ‘patchwork families’. There have also been changes in my private practice. I see more of a miracle in each person, more capacity to love and I have become more aware of the boundary situations in the lives of clients. Becoming a little more Freudian recently, that has been a great leap from theory of sex and death drives to something greater, to the realm of soul and self-realisation. I have not only understood but also felt very deeply inside how important love and hope is. I could cite here part of the John Paul II poem:

Love explained everything to me
Love solved everything,
that’s why I adore this Love,
wherever it is found.

(2000: 102)

I often think about Christopher Bollas (2013) and his idea of a psychoanalytic breakdown, which results in, simply speaking, giving up on life. In his great book *Catch Them Before They Fall*, along with Sacha Bollas he explores the phenomenology of these ‘broken selves’ and describes the variations such selves can take. He writes a lot about the nature of the breakdown and suggests that the unconscious purpose of it is to present the self to the other for transformative understanding. I believe these non-psychotic breakdowns can be seen as existential breakdowns, caused by the inability to successfully get through the boundary situation. One of the reasons for this inability is the lack (or severe deficit) of existential courage. There is no easy way to define what existential courage is. Let’s delve into this concept a little.

The word ‘courage’ comes from the same stem as the French word *couer* (heart). Plato understood courage as the inner quality related to that element of the soul which is called *tkymos*, the spirited, courageous element which lies between the intellectual and sensual elements in man. It can be seen...
as unreflective striving toward what is noble. It bridges the gap between reason and desire.

Nietzsche, who was an outstanding representative of romantic naturalism and one of the most important forerunners of the existentialist understanding of courage, understood it as the individual being able to emphasise his uniqueness as an incomparable and infinitely significant expression of the substance of being (Tillich & Cox, 2014). Self-affirmation of one’s uniqueness and acceptance of the demands of one’s individual nature is the right courage to be.

Later, the philosophy of Schelling and Schopenhauer introduced a new version of realism and it had a huge impact on existentialism and depth psychology (ibid). They postulated that true courage to affirm oneself must include the courage to affirm one’s own demonic depth. This was avidly accepted by the romantic naturalists. The courage to emphasise one’s uniqueness has also become the courage to affirm the demonic trends within oneself. This could happen because the demonic was not considered unambiguously negative but was thought to be part of the creative power of being.

Jean-Paul Sartre illuminated the existentialist scene with the observation that “the essence of man is his existence” (ibid). It means that there is no essential nature of humans, except in the point that they can make of themselves what they want. A person creates what a person is. The essence of their being is not what they find, they makes it. Humans are what they make of themselves. I believe it especially when a person is going through the boundary situation with courage.

Rollo May wrote in one of his moving books that “courage is necessary to make being and becoming possible. An assertion of the self, a commitment, is essential if the self is to have any reality” (1994: 18). His close friend Paul Tillich speaks of courage as ontological, as essential to our being: “The courage to be is the ethical act in which man affirms his own being despite those elements of his existence which conflict with his essential self-affirmation” (2014: 4).

Salvatore Maddi’s (2004) research and theory are also worth mentioning. He has proposed the term ‘hardiness’ as an operationalisation of existential courage. It enables a person experiencing the boundary situation to choose the future as the most consistent with continuing to elaborate life’s meaning, despite it also brings ontological anxiety, as expressed in fear of uncertainty and possible failure. Without it, one may choose the past regularly, which stagnates the quest for meaning. Hardiness, according to Maddi, comprises of the attitudes of commitment (vs. alienation), control (vs. powerlessness) and challenge (vs. security).

Sadly, not only in my work but also in outside world, I observe an ongoing, growing tendency among people to turn away from courage, to rather ingest prescription medications, which results in tuning out the
meaning of the boundary situation and the struggle. Instead of the struggle, people often seek a safer day-to-day existence, turning away from subjectivity. I agree with Bollas (2018) that the wish to become abnormally normal is getting more and more popular.

It leads to developing a personality, which Joyce McDougall (2015: 42) called ‘the normopath’. The normopath “seeks refuge from mental life by immersing the self in material comfort and a life of recreation.” I would also add “and is deprived of existential courage” to this characteristic. Such a person is too stable, secure, comfortable and is fundamentally disinterested in subjective life.

There are, however, steps, that we can take, to avoid normopathy and promote courage. The gravity of the condition of the patient experiencing a boundary situation requires that we take it seriously. What Christopher Bollas (2018) proposed during such a crisis was increasing the number of sessions to two each day of the week, without the necessity to pay for the extra hours. He also stands for educating the patient about the nature of a breakdown and, sometimes, spending quite a few hours with a patient instead of an hour-long session. I admire this commitment. The boundary situation is a profoundly human experience and as such should be approached with existential courage and honesty.

So, what has it all taught me? That the world is not, and will never be, as we plan it to be. We may, and probably should, think ahead in terms of taking good care but we should never forget the truth, that the world is much bigger, richer, more beautiful and, at the same time, more frightening, than we may imagine. I have not been referring to the COVID-19 pandemic on purpose, as this is just another boundary situation for many of us. We should just struggle humbly and with love for the best outcome from going through any boundary situation that we will encounter, and encourage it in our patients. Sometimes, as May once said, it is like going to Dante’s Hell with Virgil and “staying with him as long as he will need it” (1991). This is the sense of psychotherapy that enlarges the person.

**Rafal Miętkiewicz** is a psychologist, existential individual and couple psychotherapist, working in full-time private practice in Gdynia, Poland. Contact: rafal.mietkiewicz@icloud.com

**References**


Taking HIV Out of the Equation? 
A phenomenological exploration of a small group of gay men’s meaning-making around sexuality whilst on PrEP

Phoebus Ebbini & Neil Lamont

Abstract
This article explores, through a phenomenological IPA study, in which 8 semi-structured interviews were conducted, what meaning gay men on pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) make of their sexuality, and examines how sexuality is experienced through lenses of being and doing, how it is spoken about, and how the threat of HIV is still prevalent.

Key Words
Phenomenological analysis, IPA, sexuality, being sexual, PrEP, HIV, meaning, gay

Introduction
In the Western world in the last few centuries, sex between men has often resulted in criminalisation, being pathologised, discriminated against, persecuted, harassed, abused and sometimes even murdered (Shernoff, 2006). With the advent of AIDS in the Eighties, however, the risks of engaging in an active gay sex life became yet more perilous. By 1995, a staggering ten percent of the 1.6 million men between the ages of twenty-two and forty-four who identified as gay in the United States had died of AIDS (Rosenfeld, 2020).

In 1986, the US Food and Drugs Administration (FDA) approved the first antiviral medication to be used for HIV/AIDS (Shernoff & Smith, 2001). However, it was not until the mid-Nineties that a combination of drugs began to be used for HIV called highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) which massively reduced the deaths that resulted from HIV infection (AIDS map, 2017). Although not a cure, HAART became a highly effective treatment which essentially transformed HIV from an acute life-threatening illness into a manageable chronic disease (Avert, 2017).

On 16 July 2012, the US FDA approved Truvada (a patented name) as a pre-exposure prophylaxis against HIV. After considerable controversy and challenge, PrEP became available on the NHS in England in March 2020. PrEP is a combination of two drugs (emtricitabine and tenofovir disoproxil fumarate) aimed at blocking the action of a protein that
HIV needs in order to replicate in the body. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) asserts that, if used daily, PrEP reduces the risk of contracting HIV through condomless sex by more than 90% (CDC, 2017). Evidence suggests that in addition to acting as an extra layer of protection (i.e. using PrEP as well as condoms), a rising proportion of men who are on PrEP now no longer use condoms when having sex (AIDS Map, 2017).

As a result, therefore, the landscape in terms of how gay men are having sex is once more fundamentally changing. Now that the risk of contracting a lifelong illness whilst on PrEP has reduced hugely, the parameters and possibilities for sex for gay men – and what that means for them – are also changing.

This phenomenological study focused on the meaning of sexuality for eight gay men on PrEP in the UK and is based upon a psychotherapy doctoral research study. The research question posed was: “What meaning do gay men on PrEP make of their sexuality?” The first author was the researcher for this study and the second author was his primary supervisor. The terms ‘sexuality’ and ‘being sexual’ are used interchangeably throughout this article, and given that it is not possible to explore a phenomenon without an explicit or implicit understanding of what one is looking for, Spinelli’s (2014) definition of sexuality as “being or doing something sexual” was used as a guiding definition.

**Literature Review**

The literature review of the doctoral study was broadly divided into two sections. The first explored the ways in which various discourses such as psychoanalysis, social constructionism and existential phenomenology have engaged with the concept and meaning of sexuality. The second section explored the research that has been carried out to date in relation to PrEP and its impact on gay men’s lives. Given the word count for this article, the presented literature review focuses upon the second section.

**Impact of PrEP**

There has been a substantial amount of research that has been carried out on PrEP since 2012. No research has been identified so far which looks at the meaning-making around sexuality for gay men taking the drug. The strategy for the literature review therefore centred on identifying studies that explored the lived experiences of gay men on PrEP as well as their thoughts and beliefs around the drug and its impact on their sexuality, in order for the results of this current study to be better situated.

Williamson, et al. (2019) held three focus groups in Leicester, UK, which comprised thirteen HIV-negative GMSM (gay and other men who have sex with men) and five HIV-positive GMSM between the ages of twenty-
four and forty-eight, to discuss their views on PrEP. Only one participant of the eighteen was a regular PrEP user. The study found that the participants ranged from viewing PrEP as a positive development for serodiscordant couples (i.e., couples who differed in their HIV status) to viewing PrEP users as reckless and irresponsible. Some of the participants had the impression that it was only a certain ‘category’ of men who would take PrEP, often associated with taking other recreational drugs too. PrEP was seen by the majority of the participants as making condoms redundant. However, the data from this study showed that there was a fear that PrEP may actively reduce meaningful discussions about sex, as there were fears of misrepresentations and therefore an increasing lack of trust in others’ HIV status. The participants also expressed doubt and distrust of PrEP itself, including the long-term side-effects, the motivations of big pharmaceutical companies and the effectiveness of PrEP as a prophylaxis.

Huang, et al. (2019) interviewed thirty-one MSM in Taiwan to explore their experiences of being on PrEP and how they communicated that to others online on hook-up apps and with their actual sexual partners. Three major themes of ‘uncertainty’ arose:

1. Uncertainty around taking PrEP and whether to adhere to a daily or event-based regimen.
2. Uncertainty about how information regarding PrEP was perceived by others online, in particular because the translation of the online status ‘HIV-negative on PrEP’ in Mandarin is ‘HIV-negative on PrEP treatment’. This ‘status’ often confuses those who do not know about PrEP to believe that it is a treatment for HIV, rather than a prophylaxis.
3. Uncertainty in negotiating the stigma of being on PrEP, especially because the participants were aware of the various implicit messages communicated through their revealing that they were on PrEP.

A small US study by Chu, et al. (2019) involving ten participants explored how patients at two urban primary care clinics started PrEP, whether or not they adhered to it, and the pros and cons of using condoms whilst on PrEP. Of interest to this current study is some of the comments noted by the participants regarding condom use (in addition to PrEP); terms such as ‘additional protection’, ‘complete protection’ and ‘double protection’ were used to highlight how some of the users believed that PrEP on its own may not be sufficient to prevent the contraction of HIV. Further, there was an acknowledgement by the participants that sex without condoms still leaves them at risk of other STI exposure besides HIV.

A Canadian study by Grace, et al. (2018) showed that a lot of the participants expressed feeling proud and liberated by being on PrEP because they felt that they could start having normal and pleasurable sex again. This was
reported as mainly due to the anxiety and fear around HIV being significantly reduced.

Another Canadian study, Newman, et al. (2018) interviewed twenty-nine participants to explore the experiences of gay and bisexual men on PrEP, in particular their consideration of, access to and use of PrEP. By design, about half the participants were using PrEP, while the other half were not. This study found that PrEP user participants predominantly reported a significant decrease in anxiety around sex since starting PrEP. These participants reported feeling empowered to start having the sex that they wanted to have (which was mainly without condoms). Some of the participants expressed concern about contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) other than HIV, but that they felt that this risk exposure on the whole would be acceptable.

A study by Collins, et al. (2017) looked at the impact of PrEP on the sexual health of gay men in Seattle. It was an IPA study of fourteen participants aged between twenty-six and sixty-six. The study found that most of the men wanted to be on PrEP because they had previously ‘slipped up’ on using condoms and preferred having condom-less sex. The participants expressed that they felt less vulnerable, fearful and ashamed of their sexual behaviour as a result of PrEP. Some of the participants expressed a newfound sense of agency and liberation, in that they did not feel like passive victims who would inevitably contract HIV. Further, some of the participants expressed feeling that the sex they were having since starting PrEP was more satisfying, because they felt that they could engage without the anxiety around sex that they used to have. In addition, some of the participants expressed being able to experience sexual acts such as receptive anal sex, which previously they had not allowed themselves to because of the increased risk of contracting HIV.

It could be argued that, collectively, the above small group of studies point to a liberating effect of PrEP on the sex lives of gay men, and this was a key underpinning of the rationale for the present study. If the prevalence and use of PrEP is indeed a seminal moment in the contemporary history of gay sexuality, what do gay men make of that and their sexuality?

**Method**

Smith, et al.’s (2009) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used as the method for this study primarily because it focuses in-depth on individual experiences and on how participants make sense of those experiences. Following the idiographic nature of IPA, the sample of the participants was purposive and homogenous (ibid). Eight participants were recruited and the following specific inclusion criteria were:

1. Cis-gendered men who self-identify as gay; specifying cis rather than
transgendered gay men for this study was intended to avoid diluting the focus of the study;

(2) Born between 1965 and 1987; the year 1981 was used as the benchmark year when the first cases of AIDS were identified in New York and California (Avert, 2017). The rationale for this limit is that the participants are likely to have experienced at least some of their adult sexual lives in a time before PrEP, so that could form a basis from which they could compare their lives before and after PrEP;

(3) Have been taking PrEP daily for at least six months prior to the interview. This time was chosen as a relatively substantial amount of time for a PrEP user to reflect on their experiences; and

(4) If they engaged in chemsex, then this should not have been more than once in the three months prior to the interview. It was assumed that if a participant engages in chemsex regularly then it is possible that they are likely to experience their sexualities in a different way to a gay man who does not. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that a relatively high proportion of MSM do engage in chemsex at least irregularly (but not necessarily habitually) in cities such as London from where these participants were recruited. Therefore, to take that into account, three months preceding the interview was set as a limit for this inclusion criteria.

The (pseudonyms of the) eight participants, recruited using a snowball form of recruitment, were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phillip</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants were interviewed in 2018. Their interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using Smith, et al.’s (2009) process of data analysis in IPA.

**Findings**

Three superordinate themes emerged (and nine subordinate themes). These are detailed in the table on page 222:
Superordinate theme | Subordinate theme
--- | ---
1. Being sexual on a personal level | (a) Identifying as a sexual role  
(b) Engaging with the thoughts and fantasies of sex  
(c) Persistence of idea of HIV
2. Being sexual with others | (a) Talking about sex and PrEP with others  
(b) Trust and condom-less sex  
(c) Being in and out of control with others
3. Sex on PrEP | (a) Moving away from condoms  
(b) Having 'good' or ‘better’ sex  
(c) Sex is still potentially dangerous

For the purposes of this article, an overview of each superordinate theme is summarised below, encompassing some brief headline details of each subordinate theme.

**Superordinate Theme 1: Being sexual on a personal level**

One of the main ways that the participants made sense of their sexuality is on a personal level, in terms of how they related to and thought of themselves. The first way that this became apparent was through the notion of sexual roles, which included the identities that they created for themselves and the behaviours that this entailed.

Paul, for example, stated, “I’m bottom, always a bottom”, while Peter referred to doing a sexual act and being a sexual role interchangeably: “I did a lot less bottoming when I was younger than I do now… and then as I got older, I became more of a bottom.”

Although there was a clear variation in the extent to which the participants identified with their sexual roles, this seemed one of the ways in which they experienced themselves as being sexual.

Another way that the participants experienced their sexualities on a personal level was through a more conscious engagement with the thoughts and fantasies around sex, particularly around condomless sex, and somehow living those fantasies out. Many of these fantasies involved assumed taboos, transgressing boundaries and enacting what was deemed to be previously forbidden. For example, Michael described how PrEP allowed him to enact all the fantasies he wanted to try:

...a lot of swallowing of cum. Erm...Cum up the arse, cumming up a guy. They were the things that I thought I would be really into...erm...gangbangs...you know just, just the idea of...give yourself over and lose control and do what you want. There’s always been an element of control there that...that I, I...was very excited about, the idea of it being taken away.
Finally, perhaps it is unsurprising for men who take a regular prophylaxis pill against HIV to remain sometimes very aware of the notion of HIV. However, what seems inescapable for the participants is that being sexual, even whilst on PrEP, entails being in relation somehow to the threat of HIV, despite the contraction of HIV becoming less and less of a real possibility. For example, Phillip described how even after starting PrEP, he would still think about HIV: “...it [PrEP] took it [HIV] out of the equation, not completely. It was still there. I don’t trust anything 100 percent, but yeah…”

Superordinate Theme 2: Being sexual with others

Another way that the participants made sense of their sexuality was on the relational level with others. What it means to be sexual to the participants whilst on PrEP entailed them talking about sex and them being on PrEP with others (i.e. potential sexual partners), trusting their partners in order to engage in condomless sex, and experiencing both being in and out of (perceived) control with others.

In an age where ‘neg on PrEP’ (i.e. HIV-negative on PrEP) is a category that one could tick as applicable on hook-up apps like Grindr, for the participants, being sexual whilst on PrEP has entailed communicating to others that they were on PrEP. This communication seems to act as a means of revealing something significant about their sexuality or about facilitating a conversation around sexuality. For example, Joseph related that:

*The actual discussions that you have around PrEP when you talk to someone I think is more complex and advanced, rather than “Oh yeah, just put a condom on and it’ll be fine”. I’ve found myself lying in bed talking about stuff or going on the internet and finding out stuff with partners erm...being like “Oh yeah... what is this and how do we feel about this?”*

For the participants of this study, being sexual also meant having to trust in something in order to engage sexually with others. For some this has meant trusting their sexual partners, for others it has meant trusting that PrEP actually works and will continue working.

Some of the participants were very clear that they did not trust others, and instead put their trust in either PrEP or the healthcare system. James was probably the most vocal example from this group when he said “I kind of trust the drug. I don’t trust people”.

Related to the theme of trust is the theme of feeling in control of their sexual health as a result of being on PrEP. For some of the participants, feeling in control of their sexual health has enabled them to relinquish control with their sexual partners; while for others, feeling in control of
their sexual health has enhanced their ability to feel in control with their sexual partners. Andrew described how controlled he was about his sexual health prior to him starting PrEP:

Like if I was going to go out for a shag, I wouldn’t brush my teeth straight before going out. There’s all these things around, like not cutting yourself shaving...Sometimes...I’d go on a shag, but I wouldn’t go to a sleazy bar if I had a cut on my finger... And it just makes you suddenly realise how controlled you had been, and you’re not anymore.

James also described how “fastidiously” careful he was prior to PrEP with using condoms. Since starting PrEP, he has been able to “not give a shit” while getting fucked “in a darkroom in Berlin” and to have sex with “three top guys” at the same time.

Superordinate Theme 3: Sex on PrEP

An obvious implication for the participants choosing to be on PrEP was that they at least intended to engage in sex with others. Therefore, what it means to be sexual to them necessarily relates to sex, and in particular what is different about the sex that they are having since starting PrEP. What arose from the interviews was first a tangible change in the reduction of condom use: all of the participants reported that they preferred having sex without condoms, and that after starting PrEP all the participants’ use of condoms dropped. Being sexual whilst on PrEP has meant that all the participants have been having sex without condoms.

Further, all the participants were clear that as a result of PrEP they are having good or even ‘better’ sex (than prior to PrEP) and that this was important for them. Nevertheless, and despite the threat of HIV being actively managed with PrEP, all of the participants still viewed sex as a potentially dangerous activity, primarily because of the risk of contracting STIs besides HIV. For example, Michael noticed how his risk assessment around sex changed since started PrEP:

...with HIV taken out of the landscape... you then start thinking about curable diseases, so you can get antibiotics for. And then, the...the ones that are going to cause you problems like warts... and...er...herpes...so what are the risk groups for them? What are the risk activities for them?

Discussion

The working definition of sexuality that has guided this research from the outset was Spinelli’s (2014) definition of “being or doing something
sexual”. In other words, our sexuality comprises not only how we identify ourselves but also what sexual acts we engage with. One of the ways in which this definition has resonated most in the current research has been the ways in which the participants perceived of and experienced themselves in relation to sexual roles, and the extent to which PrEP allows the participants more freedom in the acts that they engage with and, therefore, also in their sexual identities.

The participants articulated both being a sexual role and doing a sexual role. Some of the participants used a sexual role as an identity – for example, Paul said, “I’m bottom, I’m always bottom”. While others described a sexual role as something that they did, for example, Simon stated, “I mostly bottom” and Peter referred to “doing” more bottoming compared to when he was younger.

The participants often switched between language of being and doing when it came to sexual roles, and it has been interesting to note when that switch happened. One of the areas where this seemed to occur was in relation to the risk of contracting HIV. Some of the participants in those instances used the language of identity (especially in relation to topping) as a possible way of distancing themselves from the likelihood of ever contracting HIV. Others described their sexual roles in ‘doing language’, thus possibly leaving the space for themselves to act differently on other occasions.

What became apparent from the results of this study is that the gay men who have chosen to start taking PrEP do not all identify in the same way in relation to PrEP. Race (2018) describes that part of the challenge in gay men starting PrEP is that they first have to come to terms with the possibility that they are ‘subjects at risk’ of contracting HIV. This can be challenging to some gay men, as it confronts them with realities about their behaviours and their proximity to HIV, which they might prefer not to acknowledge. The current findings, however, also show that some participants, such as James, Michael and Phillip felt that they were being meticulous in using condoms prior to PrEP, and so did not deem themselves to be particularly at risk of contracting HIV whilst using that particular method of prophylaxis. Their decision to start PrEP related more to their desire to experience their sexuality in broader ways. Perhaps then, (as a development on Race’s terminology), these participants could be described as ‘subjects who want more’.

In addition to being and doing, sexuality is also something that these participants speak about. This is especially true for this particular group of men, as they were all enthusiastic to take part in this research and speak to a researcher unknown to them about their experiences of being on PrEP. Foucault (1998) believes that there are many political, economic and technical forces that incite us to speak about sexuality, even as these forces act to categorise, restrict and limit sexual behaviours and activities. Epstein &
Mamo (2017) argue that nowadays talking about sex and sexuality is sanitised and legitimised by adding the word ‘health’ to the notion of the sexual. Thus, sexual health has become something we are all encouraged to look after and improve. Perhaps unsurprisingly, as PrEP has become one of the major tools in the fight against HIV, speaking about it therefore could be seen as what we are again encouraged to do, as reflected by these participants accounts.

Nonetheless, it is important not to lose sight of the phenomenon that is occurring when speaking (or articulating somehow) about sexuality or sexual health as a form of ‘doing’, and therefore could also be seen to be akin to doing something sexual. Possibly, at least for these participants, speaking about their sexuality and the fact that they are on PrEP is certainly one of the ways that they make sense of being sexual, but perhaps more presciently, one of the ways that they do something sexual.

The consequences of having sex (at least on a biological level) have varied throughout history as the severity of STIs and the availability of treatments for those STIs have varied. In exploring what it means to be sexual for a particular group of men, it is imperative to keep in mind the context and time that inherently informs what is at stake in being sexual. For example, what it means to be sexual as a gay man in the Eighties, at a time when there was no effective medication to stop HIV from being lethal, is likely to be very different to what it means to be sexual as a gay man in the Twenties at a time when there are no known STIs which cannot be either cured or managed. Further, what it means to be sexual as a gay man in a country with ready access to HIV treatment is likely to be very different to what it means to be sexual as a gay man living in a country with no easy access to sexual health care.

Apart from the fundamental ways in which the participants find themselves in the world (such as in relation to their bodies, their engagement with the constructs of gender, sexual orientation, the language(s) that they inhabit and so on), these men find themselves being-in-the-world-post-the-AIDS-crisis. They live in a world where, only a couple of decades ago, hundreds of thousands of gay men died of AIDS (Rosenfeld, 2020).

The predominant way that the participants have chosen to minimise the risk of contracting HIV has been to start taking PrEP. This has meant that they have had to start trusting a chemical prophylaxis in a way that they had previously only trusted a physical prophylaxis in the form of condoms. This has also meant that the participants are aware that PrEP would only protect them from HIV if taken as prescribed. Therefore, their adherence to PrEP is a testimony to their awareness of the reality of the threat of HIV and its persistent presence in their lives, and a testimony that (at least casual) sex is something from which they need to protect themselves in one way or another.

It is clear from the findings that the participants felt that they were
having good or better sex since starting PrEP, and that this was important for them. Each participant, in their own way, constructed what was ‘good’ sex for them, and that this often involved notions of ‘innate’ and ‘natural’ sexuality. Given that homosexuality has been viewed historically as perverse, criminal and unnatural, perhaps the valuing of the constructs of the innate and natural is unsurprising. In addition to feeling that they were having ‘better’ sex, the participants also felt that they were able to actively explore their sexual fantasies since being on PrEP in a way that they could not prior to PrEP, primarily because of the fear of HIV. Especially noteworthy of the participants’ fantasies was the extent to which they encapsulated exactly the types of sexual behaviours that would have been deemed to be life threatening a mere three decades ago.

One of the main limitations of this study is the lack of diversity amongst the participants, who were all white and able-bodied. The participants were recruited via a snowballing method of asking friends of the researcher to pass a flyer to their respective networks. In effect, this has meant that the participants were more or less from socio-economic-cultural backgrounds that were limited to the diversity of the researcher’s networks which, however diverse they may be, were still relatively narrow compared to the plurality of gay people around London, or even the UK. However, it is important to note that this research did not purport to cover the diversity of gay men in London or the UK, and that with a sample size of eight participants, the extent of the diversity achieved cannot be realistically expected to include all sub-minorities within the gay community. Although rich and important, the narratives produced from this study simply add to the existent dominant narratives of able-bodied, white gay men who live in big cities.

**Conclusion**

This research focused on a very specific group of gay men at a very specific time in history to understand what their sexuality means to them. It found that being and doing something sexual was often perceived through the perspective of sexual roles. It found that their sexualities often manifested through speaking about it, and in particular about being on PrEP. Although all the participants were HIV negative, it was clear from the findings that their sexualities still related to HIV and the latent (and not so latent) anxieties around contracting HIV. Finally, being sexual for these participants whilst on PrEP has meant having ‘better’ sex and more scope to explore their sexual fantasies.

**Phoebus Ebbini** (DProf) is a UKCP-accredited psychotherapist in private practice based in London, UK.  
Contact: phoebus@ulyssesfound.com
Neil Lamont (DCPsych, CPsychol, AFBPsS, HCPC (reg.)) is a counselling psychologist based in London, UK. He is a practitioner, clinical supervisor and research supervisor.
Contact: neil@londonbridgewellbeing.com

Acknowledgements
This article was based on work carried out in partial fulfilment of the award of a DProf degree from Middlesex University to Dr Ebbini, which would not have been possible without the guidance and support of Dr Neil Lamont (primary supervisor), Dr Patricia Bonnici (secondary supervisor) and the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling.

Endnotes
1. The study stipulated that the participants must have been at least sixteen years old by this date (i.e. an age when they may have started as adults engaging with others sexually), which means that the participants must have been born by at least 1965. The year 2012 was used as the upper benchmark, as that is the year that the US FDA approved PrEP as a suitable prophylaxis for HIV. The study stipulated that the participants should be at least twenty-five by that date, which means that the participants must not have been born after 1987.
2. Following Glyde (2015), chemsex was defined as using one or more of the following drugs either immediately before or during sex: crystal methamphetamine, mephedrone or y-hydroxybutyrate (GHB)/ y-butyrolactone (GBL).

References


The Eight Tensions Framework: An existential-phenomenological analysis of the tensions of undergraduate life

Natalie Lancer & Virginia Eatough

Abstract
An existential-phenomenological analysis of eight existential tensions situated in the university context, developed from empirical work, is presented as the ‘Eight Tensions Framework’. Originally formulated for students and their tutors, therapists and coaches to use when considering personal growth at university, it can also be adapted for use with a wider client base.

Key Words
Existential tensions, dilemmas, higher education, university, personal growth

Introduction
This paper offers an existential-phenomenological analysis of eight existential tensions, presented as the ‘Eight Tensions Framework’. This framework was developed from the first author’s doctoral research about the personal growth of undergraduates who volunteered to participate in one-to-one coaching sessions with professional coaches. Fourteen students were recruited from a Russell Group university, across various arts and social science subjects. Fourteen coaches volunteered to give pro bono coaching in response to a notice posted on the European Mentoring and Coaching Council website and sent to the first author’s professional network. The coaches could use whichever coaching approach they preferred and was appropriate for their student-client.

The study explored the experience of the fourteen undergraduates who had one (six sessions over a year) or two (twelve sessions over two years) years of coaching at the beginning of the 2014-15 academic year. At the end of the first year of coaching, the students were asked whether they wanted to continue having coaching, and could choose to have coaching with a different coach. Five students chose to continue. All participants were interviewed four times over the 2014-15 cycle and the students who continued for a second year of coaching were interviewed at fifth time, after their additional coaching sessions were completed. One-to-one, semi-structured, open-ended interviews were employed and the student’s experience of university, coaching and their personal growth were discussed.
Data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) which yielded a fine-grained and multi-layered hermeneutic picture of participants’ experiences, including an expansive analysis of how students made sense of university life and their personal quandaries to a more focused examination of the coaching experience itself.

During the empirical work, it became apparent that some existential threads emerged repeatedly, such as how students narrowed and expanded their interests, or how they sometimes ploughed ahead or lay fallow. These threads were formulated into the Eight Tensions Framework which this paper elaborates, using examples from the empirical work.

In the Eight Tensions Framework, a holistic view of growth at university is offered, covering a range of domains, which represents a step change compared to the partial view of growth presented in popular models of student development in which growth has been conceptualised as vectors (Chickering, 1969) or stages (Baxter Magdola, 1999; Perry, 1970) that are passed through sequentially. These tensions can be used by therapists, coaching psychologists, coaches, personal tutors and students themselves to overcome challenges, tackling problems that could develop into larger mental health issues.

We also believe these tensions have wider relevance for therapists, counsellors and coaches working from an existential perspective, beyond university students, because from this philosophical perspective we are all students of life. Despite the particularities of individual lives, they “will have a series of common ingredients” (Ortega y Gasset, 1960: 235). We contend that these common ingredients exist at two levels. Firstly, as humans, we all have to deal with the inevitability of life’s existential ontological givens, such as death and the fact that we inhabit this world with other people. Secondly, common ingredients are also context-specific, meaning we share some ontic, grounded givens. From the point of view of all of us being students of life, we are always negotiating, for example, opening up to new information and honing it back down again to something more manageable that we can focus on. How we respond to these two levels of shared givens will be particular to each individual. We define growth as becoming better at responding to these givens within our personal context. The outcome of growth is to become a better liver of life, meaning the goal is both fixed and open. Becoming a better liver of life is a specific outcome, but how we do this will be different for different people. This mirrors Gassett’s view that:

> Whether this name (‘my life’) is applied in my case, or to any one of you, it is a concept which then involves the individual; hence we have found one of those very rare ideas which is equally ‘general’ and ‘individual’

(ibid: 236)
Thus we see growth as being the same yet different for each of us, meaning its definition is both general and particular.

Existentially, we draw on Deurzen’s approach which is “primarily concerned with helping clients face up to the challenges of everyday life” (Cooper, 2003: 9). Life’s everyday tensions need to be artfully navigated deliberately (Deurzen, 2015) by us all. The existential approach attends to life’s vicissitudes acknowledging our bumpy experience in an unvarnished, realistic way. Furthermore, this approach acknowledges that there are ‘trade-offs’ for every position taken, meaning we may have ambivalent feelings and emotions about a place on a tension as, inevitably, we give up something when we take a particular position. As Cooper says, “you cannot have it all. Get one thing you want and, by the very nature of existence, you will be losing out on something else you desire” (2015: 121). However, Deurzen (2015) sees these potentially upsetting losses as valuable because by embracing all aspects of life, positive and negative, we can more deeply understand our possibilities and evaluate our choices. The Eight Tensions Framework presents this existential approach tangibly and digestibly.

These tensions cannot be solved once and for all. Rather, the task is to acknowledge the tensions exist. Since we rarely face our challenges head on, the task is really to learn more about to what extent and in what context we can face them (Schneider, 1999) which is equivalent to becoming a better liver of life, our definition of growth. Thus, becoming a better liver of life is not about achieving a middling position or transcending the tension. In fact, attaining a perfect balance is not existentially possible and trying to do this is a “comforting illusion” (Wahl, 2003: 267). Only in death can we be absolutely balanced and still (ibid). Therefore, each tension is necessarily dynamic and engagement with a tension is ongoing. We will always have tensions in our lives and the same ones will reappear in different contexts and times (Cooper, 2015). These tensions may be faced head on by taking an either/or approach, or by being viewed dialectally, so that a synthesis can be achieved, bringing the two opposite sides together (Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2018). It should be noted that this is more likely to be a synthesis in a particular situation at a particular time rather than a general synthesis of the tensions once and for all. It can take time to make sense of the tensions, and, moreover, sitting with unresolvable tensions may energise us (Deurzen, 2009).

Deurzen asserts that “as a bare minimum therapists should have a working knowledge of the predictable difficulties and predicaments that people frequently present in therapy” (ibid: 82). In this spirit, we present the Eight Tensions Framework, a road map of the everyday issues students face at university. Figure 1 is a diagram of the Eight Tensions Framework which serves as this ‘map’. The double arrows signify a dynamic equilibrium; a state of balance between continuing processes. This serves to reinforce
Diagram 1: The Eight Tensions Framework

1. Narrowing Down ↔ Opening Up
2. Treading Water ↔ Pushing Forward
3. Owned Action ↔ Absorption in Mass of Ideas
4. Being You ↔ Fitting In
5. Connection ↔ Separation
6. Day to Day ↔ Thinking Forward
7. Fixed Plans ↔ Fluidity of Life
8. Doing Enough ↔ Going All In
the idea that these tensions will need to be re-faced at multiple times in our life, and the resolution may well be different in each situation and time, and as we change (Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2005). Thus the tensions are dynamic. Neither side of the tension is inherently positive or negative. Furthermore, the way the tensions are lived on the ground by each student will be highly individualised. The tensions can be used flexibly and may be added to or changed in light of further research or professional experience. Summarising these challenges as tensions in a framework helps normalise them. This means that the client does not need to expend energy worrying about being in the quandary per se, because we are all in these same quandaries at various times in our life. Rather, the client can focus on how to meet these tensions. It is our hope that professionals and their clients will find the tension labels relatable and the diagram and concept to be user-friendly and that they will be adapted for use by professionals as appropriate. We now offer an existential analysis of these eight tensions, using extracts from the participants.

**Narrowing Down ⇔ Opening Up**

At university, the students’ worlds opened up quickly as they were exposed to new ideas and people. They had the freedom to explore, as they all lived away from home and were not subject to household rules. Undertaking too many activities left students feeling dispersed. However, their freedom was not boundless as they, like everyone, were restricted by the finitude of time. The students needed to narrow down their activities so they could spend the time they had on what mattered to them. Having too few interests meant the students were not making the most of university or, arguably, life. New interests could be explored at any point, so the cycle of ‘opening up’ and ‘narrowing down’ continued.

On one side of the tension, the students opened up to new ideas which, in the words of one student, were “just going to explode”. This wonder at the world is in part due to the realisation that there is more to the world than the students originally thought (May, 2009 [1953]). ‘Opening up’ ensured that the students were participating in and connected to the world. The students explored what was on offer by exploring different societies, ranging from sports to debating and writing.

However, the students’ newfound freedom and range of activities could lead to feeling too dispersed. One student described this as “trying to do a lot of things and I was just…I needed to cut a few because I felt quite thinly spread”. Existentially, freedom can feel overwhelming (Deurzen, 2005). Without imposing restrictions, we try to do too much, which results in burning out.

This leads to the other side of the tension, ‘narrowing down’. Frankl advocates “we have to choose between what is important and what is not,
what is meaningful and what is not. We have to become selective and
discriminating” (2011 [1948]: 120). Our awareness of life’s finitude “shocks
us into taking the present seriously” (May, 2009 [1953]: 205) and makes
us use our time deliberately. It sharpens our focus which a student described:

*I feel like when I first started uni it was kind of like, “Oh, there
are so many possibilities” and “This is going to be really, really
fun and also really scary” and now I’m like, “There are so many
possibilities and so little time!”*

This awareness of the finitude of time made ‘narrowing down’ necessary.
As Cooper (2015: 118) says, “the finitude of life means that a choice for
one thing is a choice against something else, and that means that our choices
really are choices”. Thus, the existential question is about how you want to
spend your time and energy. We have to ask ourselves which of the “mass
of present potentialities…will be condemned to non-being and which will
be actualised” (Frankl, 2004 [1959]: 124) as we cannot do everything.

The students were free to experiment, ‘narrowing down’ their activities,
as they explored what was on offer and as their interests changed. Narrowing
down can also be achieved by default, as various students demonstrated,
when they were not selected for committees or failed auditions for plays.
Furthermore, possible opportunities change; for example, societies shut
down, forcing the students to pursue other options. Thus, we have a situated
free choice of what to participate in, based on the realistic situation. We
are “the product of chance and opportunity” (Adams, 2014: 42) and must
accept that some choices are out of our control. However, we can choose
within the choices available. At the extreme end of this tension, being too
narrow may result in “a narrow and shrunken world space, [where] growth
and development are blocked” (May, 1983/1994: 20).

Overall, Narrowing down ⇔ Opening up is a shifting tension in which
students stopped doing some activities and experimented with others. This
experimentation led to a clearer idea of how the students wanted to spend
their time.

**Treading Water ⇔ Pushing Forward**

The second tension is about when to take action and challenge yourself
and when to consolidate and maintain the status quo. Creating ourselves
is a continuous project (Beauvoir, 2015 [1948]). If we do not actively
keep moving forward, transcending what we are at any given moment,
then we are not in a state of affirmative living but rather in a state of “not
dying” (ibid: 89). This rising above our givens and sculpting of our lives
requires decision, not only in what to do, but also in deciding to rise
above our givens at all (May, 2009 [1953]).

We define ‘pushing forward’ as growing beyond our current capabilities,
within our givens, by making a decision and taking action. Examples of ‘pushing forward’ include one student making good use of a contact to obtain a busking license in order to raise his band’s profile and money for charity simultaneously. The students put themselves “on the line” (May, 2009 [1953]: 164), risked trying something new and made a choice, disrupting their status quo, which took courage (Tillich, 2000 [1952]).

Taking risks and challenging ourselves is not easy, and is an active decision. By not pushing ourselves we can become stagnant, which is an extreme form of ‘treading water’. One student recounted a meeting with his tutor in which he regretfully realised that he had not participated in anything outside study the previous year. Fear of non-being, or the “ontological guilt” (May, 1994 [1983]: 116) of not realising our possibilities, can be constructive as it can result in “increased creativity in the use of one’s own potentialities”, thus propelling us into taking action and ‘pushing forward’. Transcending our position by challenging ourselves helps us feel alive (Adams, 2013).

However, ‘treading water’ is not effortless and is more than just standing still. A great deal of energy is required to stay where we are (Deurzen, 2013). Developing habits obviates the need to rethink from first principles. Indeed, continuity gives us an identity as we take on a stable role. However, this may “prevent us from seeing our own freedom” (Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2005: 166) as roles are not fixed; we can change.

There may be good reasons for ‘treading water’. We cannot forge ahead in all aspects of life, as various choices vie for our limited attention. Some domains may require ‘treading water’ to provide enough energy for forging ahead in others. Furthermore, ‘treading water’ may mean doing the activities you are doing and not taking on any more while you consolidate your position or achieve “lateral growth” (Perry, 1970: 178), building up proficiencies, stamina and stability. Sometimes, ‘treading water’ is synonymous with self-care, to avoid burn out and exhaustion.

Furthermore, in states of relaxation, or at least “the transition between work and relaxation” (May, 1994 [1975]: 62), people can get their most creative ideas. Schneider (1999: 8) attributes additional benefits to pausing, another form of ‘treading water’; “when we pause, much emerges that otherwise gets lost – memory, imagination, possibility”. He suggests that these factors are necessary for us to thrive. Thus ‘treading water’ holds much positive value.

Sometimes the resolution of this tension was not to steadfastly push ahead, but to “learn to bend” (Deurzen, 2009: 119); that is, be more forgiving of our needs as humans. Martin, for example, allowed himself to stop forging ahead, working “24/7” and balance his work with his need of self-care, such as watching television. For most students, navigating this tension...
involved finding a balance between ‘treading water’ and ‘pushing forward’. One student exemplified this:

...obviously you’ve got to have like an introverted side to it [personal growth] where you learn to think things through properly but then you’ve got to be able to stand up to the things that you thought through and act upon what you’ve done. Whether it works out or not, like you’ve got to do it. Yes.

Here ‘treading water’ took on a more reflective and analytical quality, in contrast to ‘pushing forward’, which was action-orientated.

**Owned Action ⇔ Absorption in Mass of Ideas**

The third tension is about how the students responded to the rich, swirling collection of ideas to which they were exposed at university. ‘Owned action’ signifies how the students made their “own distinctive mark” or “appropriated” (Caputo, 2018: 53) the world in which they were immersed. The words ‘mass’ and ‘absorb’ in ‘absorption in mass of ideas’ have dual meanings. On the one hand, there was a large number of ideas with which to get immersed and excited. On the other hand, existentially, the ‘mass’ or “the ‘they’” (Cooper, 1999: 112) refers to how ‘one’, a generic person but no-one in particular, understands something.

Being absorbed in the mass has an important function; it enables us to be open to what is going on in the world and provides possibilities. However, the ‘they’ lulls us into false security of “ready-made” meanings in a “ready-made” world (Beauvoir, 2015 [1948]: 42). We tend to get ‘absorbed’ by the masses, losing our unique self and unable to make our mark. Thus we need to “take a stand” (Wrathall, 201: 358) on the meanings we find important as articulated by one of the students: “So I can, I can have an opinion which is actually thought through, like it’s not just given to me by someone else and I feel like that is important to me.”

A positive effect of the crowd was illustrated by a student who was encouraged to think about deep issues as he was influenced by his peers going on protest marches. Another student illustrated the more negative side. She felt that her peers held fixed political opinions such as Marxism, without questioning what this meant. There is no personal relevance or meaning in ideas that are absorbed, leading to a lack of unity of self, with their borrowed meaning wrought personally meaningless (May, 1994 [1983]).

Simply regurgitating received and current understandings amounts to an “inauthentic repetition” (Caputo, 2018: 52) in which no distinctive mark has been made. Caputo gives an example of an ‘authentic repetition’:

*Great pianists start out by being taught to play the classics without making any mistakes until, eventually, at a crucial point,*
the playing becomes their own; they achieve their own style, their own unique interpretation”

(ibid: 31)

When we are authentic, our possibilities are not limited to the current way things are done. We can “deviate” or “creatively reinterpret” (Käufer & Chemero, 2015: 65) how ‘the they’ understand the idea at hand. This is illustrated by a student who talked about his non-conventional perspective on Freshers’ week, which involved chatting with friends and making scones rather than going to nightclubs. Thus, he eschewed the crowd and owned his actions. Another student epitomised Caputo’s notion of ‘authentic repetition’ and therefore the ‘owned action’ side of this tension. She drew ideas and personal meaning from an inherited world, in this case their course, and made its generic knowledge their own. Having learned about intensive farming on her course, she decided could not subscribe to the farming industry’s ethics and became a vegetarian.

Owning ideas takes courage, creativity and risk (May, 2009 [1953]), as by putting your own stamp on an idea and making a decision about it, you put your neck on the line. However, all decisions can be re-evaluated and the actions we want to ‘own’ change. Furthermore, it may take time for ideas to be fully owned.

In sum, without being open to what the crowd is thinking and doing, the pool of new ideas would be dried up. However, these ideas need to be creatively reinterpreted to ensure they are a genuine fit for the student rather than an inauthentic regurgitation.

**Being You ⊆ Fitting In**

The fourth tension is about how much to “take a stand” (Wrathall, 2015: 358) as a ‘self’ (‘being you’) versus how much of yourself to mould to others, including individuals, groups or institutions (‘fitting in’). We need to find a way of living with others which we can endure which may be different in different situations. One student illustrated the ‘being you’ side of the tension:

> I’m a bit more sort of like ‘Here’s my personality – deal with it!’ sort of thing [...] it’s fine because in the same way there are people going away, there are people coming and being sort of closer to me which is nice.

The student decided to unashamedly express his personality and found that some people liked that while others were put off. He was willing to accept this trade-off.

Another student illustrated ‘fitting in’: when she was living in halls in
her first year, she put up a façade for her peers, although she was more comfortable the following year when she felt she did not do this. However, ‘fitting in’ sometimes made for easier relationships. One student conformed to the group by sharing his ideas about essays with his friends, rather than being a “wallflower”. Although he liked observing others, he felt that it was better for his relationships to contribute more.

An extreme example of ‘fitting in’ comes from another student. She was told by her tutors and classmates that she was too “brutal” and “honest” in what she said, which resulted in her not contributing to class, despite wanting to. “Being honest to other people” was at the core of her “way of taking a stand on existence” (Wrathall, 2015: 358). Her peers’ suggestion that she should act inauthentically put her in existential disarray. Thus, she was living the tension of the need to belong, in this case, with others who did not share her core value and the need to be her ownmost self (Adams, 2013). In the event, she adopted a behaviour that felt unaligned with how she wanted to behave in order to have better relationships. This illustrates a trade-off as the student felt it was more important to have easier relationships, as she had felt “isolated” and “lonely” in her first year, than to behave authentically. This is in line with May’s (1994 [1983]: 21) observation that “the real threat is not to be accepted, to be thrown out the group, to be left solitary and alone”. Thus she reined in her straight-forwardness to fit in with what other people wanted her to be, sacrificing her own anchoring value of honesty which mattered and was meaningful to her.

Some students managed to achieve a synthesis of this tension. One student found being with others helped her understand more about herself: “…you meet people and you relate to them or you don’t relate to them and it makes you more aware or less aware of things in yourself.” Thus we can grow in our awareness of ourselves through social exchanges (Finlay, 2011).

Another student illustrated a synthesis of ‘being you’ and ‘fitting in’ in which she could be herself and have friends:

I don’t have to be a certain person to have friends or be accepted by people. I can just be me. I’m still trying to figure out who that is, but I’m not being something I’m not anymore.

This also illustrates that finding out who ‘you’ are is not clear cut and can take a long time.

Thus, despite how the tension may first appear, ‘being you’ is not always easy or straightforward. There are positive and negative ramifications of ‘being you’. Furthermore, there may be advantages to fitting in, especially as it may positively influence the way you behave.
**Connection ⇔ Separation**

The fifth tension is about actively making connections between different aspects of life, including forming connections with others and purposefully separating other aspects, such as dividing work up or severing ties with others. A particular student exemplified making connections in his work. Once he connected his work with being creative, with the aid of his coach, he enjoyed essays more, putting more of ‘himself’ into them. Separation in work involved the breaking up of big assignments into separate chunks to make it more manageable, a technique which many students learned in their coaching sessions.

One student illustrated actively seeking connections with others. He was able to connect with people at parties and could forge new friendships by finding points of connection with people, such as enjoying similar television shows, films and music. University field trips facilitated connection as the people on them were inherently linked by doing the same subject.

The students experienced different levels of connection in relationships, which can be explained existentially by Buber’s (2000 [1958]) ‘I-Thou’ and ‘I-It’ primary relationships. ‘I-It’ constitutes the majority of our relationships. It is the relationship we have with things and people that allows us to “experience” the world and “use” items in it including people (ibid: 48). It is characterised by separation as it occurs when people divide up others, such as analysing their hair colour or style of speech (ibid). We, as a subject, take the other person as an ‘It’, an object, rather than as a whole being in their totality, setting up a barrier between them and us (ibid) meaning the person “ceases to be Thou” (ibid: 24). In contrast, when we meet the other subject to subject, in their totality, something is created which means we are no longer “bounded” but are in “relation” with each other (ibid: 20). We are connected, albeit fleetingly. We do not think about the qualities of the other, but are absorbed by them, in an ‘I-Thou’ experience.

An international student used to think about social encounters as a problem, something to be worked on, and so as ‘I-It’ encounters. A barrier had been created, such that she was the subject and the others the object. This backfired as she was not able to enjoy social opportunities as whole beings. However, when she behaved ‘naturally’ and authentically, she had better interactions and was able to talk to others as mutual subjects and could thus experience authentic connection. Similarly, when one student regarded his flatmate as “just” someone he lived with rather than a best friend, he took him as an ‘It’. However, they eventually made up and were back to being best friends. This example illustrates the dynamism of the Connection ⇔ Separation tension.

Friendships were subjected to connection and separation because, as a student said, “all of these bonds aren’t solidified yet and easy to break and
easy to make at the same time”. Some students were open to making many friendships while exploring their new situation, forging many connections. However, these were not all deep and sometimes involved putting up a “front”. One student went on to adopt the other end of the tension, separating herself from many of those connections, and focusing on those who she wanted “to spend quality time with”, which alludes to the possibility of I-Thou experiences. This separation from certain friendships is necessary as time and energy are finite, meaning we cannot have deep friendships with everyone (Rawlins, 2006: 104).

Separation was, at times, actively pursued: one student broke up with her boyfriend so she could concentrate on her work and another felt that his first year friends no longer shared his interests and values. As we and others change, which we always do as we are always “becoming” and “not yet” (Deurzen, 2015: 194-195), our friendships may no longer fit us, so we may make an active choice to end them. Thus both sides of this tension could be adopted in different domains of university life. Positions of connection and separation could be applied to different relationships and could change within a relationship.

**Day-to-Day ⇋ Thinking Forward**

The sixth tension is about how we live in “psychological time” (May, 2009 [1953]: 195), which differs from chronological time as it based on the meaning of experiences. For May (2009 [1953]), the meaning things have for us affects our experiences of time. For example, being bored is “unendurable only when it has not been freely chosen or affirmed by one’s self as necessary for the attainment of some greater goal” (ibid: 197). Thus the day-to-day, humdrum tasks that are necessary to achieve a greater goal become bearable as they have meaning. We therefore must straddle the present and future at the same time, as our life is given meaning by our goals.

Focus on the day-to-day was important for keeping up with university work. Many students were able to get into a routine with university work to help them achieve their goal of passing the degree. One student had to make changes to her routine to ensure it was productive for her, such as taking breaks every two hours by going for a walk. These seemingly small everyday decisions, which build up to achieving a goal, take courage in themselves (May, 2009 [1953]). This student chose to enhance her study routines to “help myself, like, get in the best position for after uni”, showing how future commitments manifest in the present. She illustrates how the present is the time to take action:

...I’ve learnt that if I want to achieve something, instead of stressing out, I need...I need to work out what I can do to help myself and then proactively do that rather than stress out about it.
Thus day to day pragmatism helped actualise possibilities.

However, being overly focused on the day-to-day was not optimal as it meant that the students could get too bogged down with tasks without checking they were relevant for their goals. Thus, time could be wasted. One student was originally on the ‘day-to-day’ end of the tension, and exemplified wanting to connect both ends of the tension so that her day-to-day tasks meshed with her future goals:

Because at the moment my life is very fluid so things that I have to do that become urgent happen so fast and need to be done so fast that I do them almost straight away, and then things that are important are very long-term. [...] I really need to translate my long-term goals into short and mid-term goals so that I can see very clearly why what I am doing now is important. And if I can’t see that I am not going to do it.

Thinking about the future was therefore important to ensure the purposiveness of the day to day tasks.

Strategising about the future is important so we can have a purpose and something to aim for, giving meaning to our day-to-day lives and tasks. Indeed, Heidegger maintained that our primary orientation is future-facing (Käufer & Chemero, 2015). Many students thought about their future career which gave them something to work towards and motivation to get their work done. Frankl (2004 [1959]: 110) identifies this “gap between what one is and what one should become” as a fruitful tension, as it motivates us to take action in the present in order to fulfil something that has meaning for us.

However, by focusing too much on the future, our aspirations will remain “pipe dreams” (Arnett, 2015: 187). Arnett compares those who are “pouring their hearts into every day” to those who “enjoy imagining a glorious future but doing little to make it happen”. Thus it is important to keep a handle on both the present and the future, meshing both sides of the tension together.

In sum, we make goals for ourselves and so are forward-looking, but it is important to stay grounded and attend to the day to day tasks which will help us attain our goals. The tension arises as it is difficult to keep both day to day activities and future possibilities in sight, and ensure they fit together.

Fixed Plans ⇋ Fluidity of Life

The seventh tension is about how we make concrete plans in an uncertain and unknown world. Even with a goal in mind, the path to get there is rarely linear; our projects and plans meander. Furthermore, our goals change and circumstances outside our control may change our plans. However, without a plan, we are aimless.
Our world is unpredictable, but we can pro-actively make contingency plans. One of student illustrated this: losing her mobile phone prompted her to consider how she could pre-empt such setbacks. She backed up her work, which was helpful, as she subsequently lost her laptop. Accepting that life is unpredictable can help us take action and embrace uncertainty head-on.

Moreover, we are not fixed. We may try to stabilise ourselves through habits and roles that feel solid. However, we are “filled with nothingness” (Deurzen, 2015: 195) and pretend we are substantive. Furthermore, our world can ‘break down’ by no longer being viable for our way of living; our passion may fall away or we may die. Thus, our possibilities can disappear, meaning we are not synonymous with a particular role, and no role is securely ours. It is our human lot to engage in a fixed plan knowing it is not fixed at all (Käufer & Chemero, 2015). When we accept this, we can make plans with “contingent commitment” (ibid: 75) which refers to making a commitment so that we can identify with something, whilst realising that this commitment cannot be absolute (ibid). Making a commitment or ‘fixed plan’ gives us the ground from which to catapult ourselves into exploring the world in a positive meandering. One student had an initial plan to be either a lawyer or a teacher. He then decided to be an academic, illustrating that these initial ‘commitments’ are not fixed. Thus his contingent commitment worked positively for him as he could change direction.

Our future possibilities are restricted by reality. One student wanted to work in the publishing industry. His coach encouraged him to pick four publishing internships to apply for, thereby actualising a possibility and taking concrete action. However, as with any position taken, there is always a trade-off. By taking concrete steps, he had to leave the security of merely thinking about a potential job and instead apply for it and risk rejection, potentially therefore destroying his dream. In the event, his applications were unsuccessful. Existentially, we must take action knowing there is uncertainty. As May (2009 [1953]: 189) says, “to seek the truth is always to run the risk of discovering what one would hate to see”. We do not live in a vacuum and not everything is in our control. Thus, we are always “thrown back” (Lewis & Staehler, 2013: 89) into the realities of our factical world. However, we still have a say in how we react to our situation, meaning the student could pick himself up from the rejections and apply for something else.

Some actions are better without a fixed plan. One student found that taking an organic, rather than planned, approach to social situations to be more conducive to social development, although work benefited from a day-to-day plan. Therefore, some life domains do not seem to be amenable to being moulded into fixed plans. We cannot always shape our future and there are times when actively taking a ‘fluid’ approach is beneficial (Deurzen, 2009).

Not committing to anything at all can give us a “debilitating sense of
drift” (Damon, 2008: 103). Conversely, having commitments that are too rigid, such as unfounded beliefs about the difficulty of entering a particular industry, can also be debilitating as it may mean that possibilities are closed down without trying them out first.

**Doing Enough ⇔ Going All In**

The eighth tension is about students feeling they were not using 100 percent of their talent and energy, ‘doing enough’, versus feeling 100 percent invested, with energy and commitment, ‘going all in’. The feeling of ‘going all in’ equates to Deurzen’s (2009: 149) “intensity of contact with reality” which we seek so that we feel fully alive. This intensity was expressed by several students, who found their courses meaningful and were able to ‘go all in’. When going ‘all in’ to something which aligns with us, we can be in ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002), which gives rise to positive feelings and a sense of meaning.

Some students moved from ‘doing enough’ to going ‘all in’ and using their full potential. One student felt she had not lived up to her potential in her studies the previous year. She realised she did not want to waste her potential or time and was excited to get her teeth into her studies.

It is possible to help yourself ‘go all in’ by taking some kind of action. One particular student had felt that while he was with his tutees, he was seventy percent focused on them and thirty percent worrying about his work, and vice versa; he was never able to give 100 percent to what he was doing. However, when he scheduled his time effectively, he was able to focus on the activity at hand and ‘go all in’.

Another student did not enjoy his degree at all. He could not switch course for funding reasons, however, he did want to attain a degree. His response to the limitations imposed on him was to ‘do enough’ to get by and to think of the degree as “another thing” and a “safety net”. This marked a change from ‘going all in’ to ‘doing enough’. Existentially, when his course became “just another thing”, the meaning he had attributed to it, even in a diminished form, broke down; it became a ‘no thing’. There are many different parts of life to feel invested in, and the student accepted that, for him, the degree was not one of them. However, he was able to ‘go all in’ with his music, demonstrating that it is possible to ‘go all in’ with one aspect of life and not another. We cannot ‘go all in’ in all aspects of life due to time and energy limitations.

Another student illustrates moving from ‘going all in’ to ‘doing enough’. She wanted to ‘go all in’ by looking at non-compulsory but useful mathematics as it applied to her degree, and the workings of a relevant computer program, but this cost her time. By ‘going all in’ on one aspect, she neglected the rest of her coursework, and so did not attain her desired grade. She resolved...
to rein in her interest in mathematics until after she had passed the degree. This left her frustrated as she was being introduced to interesting ideas which she felt the course infrastructure did not allow her the time to explore. Thus sometimes you want to ‘go all in’ with something but constraints mean you have to settle for ‘doing enough’. Existentially, this about how we choose to respond to the opportunities available to us (Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2018). The student was forced to prioritise, as time is finite and limiting situations are imposed by others. This underscores not only that we are inextricably linked to a context but also that we are ‘subject to’ (Lowenthal, 2017) various limits within it. We are not free-floating atomistic agents but are in a web of other people and institutions with their own rules; our desires are limited by reality.

Thus, both sides of the tension will be occupied over time and in different domains. As with all existential tensions, neither side is better than the other. They just ‘are’ and one side may become preferable in a given situation.

**Conclusion**

This paper has drawn on an existential perspective to offer an alternative, more holistic understanding of growth – to become a better liver of life. Underpinning the Eight Tensions Framework with this existential approach, privileges attending to clients’ choices in how to live and the need to keep re-examining decisions since we and our circumstances change. Therefore, clients are guided to “take charge of the possibilities” (Deurzen, 2005: 7) of their lives, thus becoming better livers of life.

The form of tensions, in which neither end has a value judgement, more realistically depicts how we experience life in situ, retaining the complexity of the experience, rather than simplifying the situation down to whether someone has lost or gained a specific ability or characteristic. For example, increased confidence which may facilely seem positive and one dimensional, may entail the trade-off of losing friends.

One of the benefits of depicting tensions rather than linear stages of growth is that we can reframe what may seem pejorative or deficient observations such as this:

*Pizzolato (2004) found that students with a number of risk factors for attrition entered college with some ability to self-author, but many regressed to a stage of following (or seeking) external formulas once they arrived; some members of this group regained their self-authoring positions as they learned to cope with their new surroundings.*

(Renn & Reason, 2013: 215).

Self-authorship (Baxter Magdola, 2001) is about working out your own
position rather than following others’ formulae which is akin to the tension in the Eight Tensions Framework Being you ⇔ Fitting in. This itself demonstrates how a popular model of student development (Baxter Magdola, 2001) offers a partial view compared to the more holistic Eight Tensions Framework; that is, it is equivalent to only one of eight dimensions. When viewing self-authorship as a tension, we reach a more nuanced understanding of what is described above. Moving to following external formulas is not necessarily a regression, but a sliding to the other side of the scale during a ‘bedding down’ phase. By framing the experience as going down a level, it seems that the students have lost some cognitive function or ability. This is not the case as the students in Pizzolato’s study (2004) regained their self-authorship. The students’ apparent decline in self-authorship was to do with their situation and may have been a result of preserving “psychological energy” which was necessary for fitting into their new surroundings.

Beyond the university context, the Eight Tensions Framework is potentially useful and relevant to professionals who view their clients as students of life. As Levinson (1978: 244) says, “as long as life continues, no period marks the end of the opportunities and the burdens of further development” and thus we always have the potential to learn more and become better livers of life. We encourage readers, who may be therapists, counsellors, psychologists or coaches, to reflect on whether the Eight Tensions Framework holds for their contexts.

Dr Natalie Lancer teaches at the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling. She is a Chartered Psychologist, existential coach and Honorary Secretary of the British Psychological Society’s Special Group in Coaching Psychology.
Contact: Natalie.lancer@gmail.com

Virginia Eatough is a Reader in the Department of Psychological Sciences at Birkbeck University of London. Her research interests focus on understanding emotional experience from a phenomenological psychology perspective.
Contact: v.eatough@bbk.ac.uk; Birkbeck, University of London, Department of Psychological Sciences, Malet Street, London, WC1E 7HX

References
Arnett, J. J. (2015). Emerging Adulthood: The winding road from the late
teens through the twenties. (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Baxter Magdola, M. B. (1999). Creating Contexts for Learning and Self-
Authorship: Constructive-developmental pedagogy. Nashville: Vanderbilt
University Press.
transforming higher education to promote self-development. Sterling:
Stylus Publishing.
(trans.) Oxford: Blackwell.
Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2002). Flow: The classic work on how to achieve
& Arnold-Baker, C. (eds.) Existential Perspectives on Human Issues:
A handbook for therapeutic practice. Macmillan International Higher
Education.
Deurzen, E. van (2013). Existential psychology. In Runehov, A. & Oviedo,
existential approach. (2nd ed.) Chichester: John Wiley.
van & Arnold-Baker, C. (eds.) Existential Perspectives on Human
Issues: A handbook for therapeutic practice. Macmillan International Higher
Education.
Finlay, L. (2011). Phenomenology for Therapists: Researching the lived
Frankl, F. (2011/1948). Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning. London:
Rider.
A Year of the Pandemic: Existential themes for psychotherapists

Claire Spiller

Abstract
My ideas for this paper arose during work with colleagues at the Metanoia Institute to assist in updating the research study ‘The challenges and experiences of psychotherapists working remotely during the coronavirus pandemic’ (McBeath, du Plock & Bager-Charleson, 2020). As a result of our collaboration, I identified a number of existential themes, which I felt inspired to develop. These themes indicate that as the spring tide of pandemic restrictions starts to ebb, it may leave existential challenges on its shore. This paper explores a range of emerging existential themes for consideration, and points the way to further research, specifically to consider how existential therapists have engaged with clinical practice during lockdown and identify recommendations for future practice.

Key Words
Pandemic, being, isolation, technology, opportunity, online disinhibition, presence, identity

Introduction
I remember the moment it hit me. I sat amidst a cloud of disorientation after a valued client was hesitant to handle my change when paying at the end of session. They separated the coins, sanitised and left. Our alliance was intact but it was clear that outside something new was emerging which was impacting the nature of how we related. Like a harsh wind rattling a window frame, the global emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic had arrived at my consulting room before I had even grasped its magnitude.

Grounding myself in a beautiful chair within the sunny ‘daffodil’-themed room adjacent to my own, I had never encountered caution of touching money before. In the next few days, on my forty-eighth birthday in March 2020, I switched off the lights in my therapy room without knowing when I would return.

In doing so, I joined thousands of other psychotherapists across the country in a mass professional migration. I headed home and wrote to all clients with whom I had been working in person about moving online. Working remotely was not new for me, but to be exclusively so was. I had valuable supervisor and peer support, and sourced training to manage the transition of my practice.
As the presence of COVID-19 grew across the world, I began to think about the spaces left behind, but also emerging from this mass shuttering of consulting rooms. I am not referring to the rooms themselves, rather what such empty rooms once held within, and as I reflected upon this several existential themes came into bud.

I started to wonder: what might be emerging, in the time since therapy room lights were globally turned out en masse? I sat with my reflections and looked to the environment. I live near a coastal, Victorian landscaped park, whose trees, plants and flowers have all seen the sprouting of my being since I was a child, then into my teens and adulthood. I have learned that just as plants evolve and adapt to the conditions in which they grow, their surrounding environment plays a vital role in the evolution of all biodiversity. As the coastal wind ruffled my notebook, I was struck how sea spray often scorches plants which have evolved in different habitats. I became curious how the gale-force presence of the pandemic was impacting therapists within our own existential landscapes.

Accordingly, in April 2021, I set out to review the current literature. The search suggested that research papers in existential themes for therapists during the pandemic are negligible. The search terms ‘pandemic and therap* and remote*’ produced 100 citations through the EBSCO search; ‘existential and therap* and remote*’ received nine. ‘Pandemic and existential and therap* and remote*’ received two. ‘Therap*’ was a ‘wildcard’ technique I learned from the Metanoia library service to maximise EBSCO literature search results; that is, to capture results in relation to both ‘therapy’ and ‘therapeutic’. I screened each citation for eligibility and manually checked references from across these three searches in order to remote any duplicated results. This left thirty-one articles remaining from the EBSCO search which mostly identified a range of papers relating generally to online work.

As I surveyed the limited research, I was struck by the differences between literature published by therapists generally and by existential therapists. Existential therapy literature is striking through its embodiment of an experiential, linguistic distinctiveness, redolent of Buber’s ‘I-thou’ attitude (1937/2004), honouring the living experience of the other, as compared to an ‘I-it’ language of functionality sometimes present in more general papers.

**Being**

In the dark winter landscape of 2020, Aho’s paper ‘The uncanny in the time of pandemics: Heideggerian reflections on the coronavirus’ (2021) was a light. It impacted me profoundly. Right from the abstract, Aho sets out how the disruption of the pandemic has “undermined our ability to be” or “make sense of things”. We have been ‘thrown into a liminal state of uncertainty”, uprooted from the “routinised familiar” rhythms of our
lives and “experience of lived-space” having broken down. He draws on Heidegger’s notion of the ‘uncanny’, which for me, felt like a storm lantern with which to navigate the new territory created by the pandemic, writing, “we are, in Heidegger’s words, wholly displaced, as everyday familiarity collapses” (ibid: 7).

I remember breathing deeply as I read these words, confirming not only my experience but also my initial shock at the rapidity of the pandemic’s global emergence. It reminded me of the film *Taxi Driver* (1976) whose protagonist gave voice to the absence of stimulus in his life and resultant stultifying experience: “The days move along with regularity, over and over, one day indistinguishable from the next, a long continuous chain.”

Thematically, I was hearing similarities in my clinical practice, as I entered my own experience of *Groundhog Day*. This was a 1993 film in which the main character is living the same day repeatedly within a time-loop. The term ‘Groundhog Day’ became a widely-used metaphor in the pandemic and, to try to break my own ‘loop’, at night I would listen to Radio Shetland’s exploration of their abandoned, uninhabited archipelago, imaging that I were exploring them also.

**Isolation**

Tolmachova (2021) identifies that, for some, isolation presents opportunities while others not. My own experience was an opening of space like I had never before experienced. I had been travelling nationally as a trainer for some time and giving up long commutes seemed enantiodromic to how large parts of my life had been. I welcomed it. Conversely, I met many who struggled with isolation, in groups I ran online, each of us against the backdrop of our own living embodied experiences and unique galleries of our lives, that make us who we are.

Manning (2021: 23) draws Heideggerian philosophy into a spotlight to reflect on isolation amidst the pandemic. He refers to Heidegger’s experience of a ‘heavy snowfall’ that confines inhabitants indoors within Germany’s Black Forest. Manning elegantly contemplates aspects of Heidegerrian thought from which the reader may draw for support during mass isolation. Such times, he suggests, offer the possibility to reflect on the meaning and impact of situations, if we “slow, pause, stop” in Heidegger’s notion of ‘meditative thinking’. But do we take this time, Manning wonders, “even when we have time” to think meditatively? Or do we reach for technology without thinking of how we construct our experiences with its different forms?

**Technology**

Manning refers to Heidegger’s work ‘The question concerning technology’ as he asks what forms of technology have “helped us understand what is happening to the world during this pandemic” and what forms have done
"little or nothing" and wasted our time? (ibid: 24).

The pandemic seems to be changing how we use technology, impacting our relationship to it across the world. If I cast my mind back to the advent of the internet, technology, as I experienced it in inner-city Cardiff, seemed only for the economically fortunate or digitally literate.

Since the pandemic, technology seems differently constituted, offering a refuge in which the world may be simultaneously together, whilst alone. Screens have become an increasing part of everyday life, and clients often bring their online relationships and experiences into therapy spaces, which are also likely to be online. Video calling can offer a sense of ‘being with’ the other (Perry, 2021) as well as a risk of overstimulation if using multiple platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram. How is it for us to ‘be’ with the other and how are we doing so in the digital world? Existential dimensions, perhaps, on which to reflect.

Maier, et al (2021) researched experiences of couple and family therapy online in the coronavirus pandemic. Findings included clients experience of a ‘safe therapeutic space’ and a sense of emotional needs being met during online work. Participants in the study shared their ‘ease’ and ‘relief’ at being able to work remotely rather than travel to a ‘physical building’ and for some, without the anxiety of sitting in a waiting room. One participant shared about teletherapy, “I don’t have to worry about what people are thinking of me in the waiting room” (ibid: 8).

Simon, et al (2021) conducted research with NHS commissioners and managers into experiences of internet-based psychological therapies, and identified a “shift in practice” with “increasingly positive views” regarding working with clients remotely since the coronavirus pandemic. Their research recommends the need to “raise awareness” for the evidence base of online psychological therapy, in order to “dispel misconceptions” (ibid: 17) such as perceived differences in the therapeutic alliance between online and in-person work. There are interesting indications of the role practitioners may play in influencing the process of adapting to remote work. Reflecting on resistance to phone assessments before the pandemic, one participant shares as follows: “The staff didn’t want it to succeed and it didn’t…now… telephone assessments are fantastic, we’ve been able to keep the service going…” (ibid: 12).

This echoes Chen, et al (2020) who note how therapist beliefs and predilections affect the course and outcome of online therapy. Attitudes and beliefs, whether positive or otherwise, at some level permeate the online space and impact upon the process. Beaumont’s (1993: 85) reference to Buber’s notion of “structures of relationship, the forms which organise the field of betweens” in therapy comes to mind; an amorphous process of embodied experiential phenomena, all springing forth within mutually emergent synthesis, transferred within an online client and therapist dyad.
Our relationship to technology as therapists is an emerging existential theme which seems worthy of further consideration. I use the preposition ‘to’ in recognition that not all therapists will have a relationship with technology, though technologically-mediated relational issues may be part of the client’s experiential world.

**Death and Dying**

Another existential theme arising from Manning’s study of (2020) is death and dying. Some of us may have lost friends or relatives to the pandemic, or for other reasons since its arrival, and for many the pandemic has changed the process of mourning and the experience of funerals, in a wider context of the risks posed to our own mortality. To impact the process of death and dying almost defies description.

I attended a family funeral online during the first wave, when an unstable internet connection only added to the poignancy of my not being there. Connectivity restored at the time of committal starkly highlighted the “reality of this unusual and unusually cruel situation” (ibid: 25).

As the pandemic drew the winter landscape darker, there were unusual emergences too. Our planet became “significantly freer of pollution” and night skies became “filled with stars” like never seen before (ibid: 27). Herds of goats in Llandudno, North Wales, descended on to the town centre and basked in its silence, one of many instances of wildlife across the country who tentatively emerged into urban spaces.

**Opportunity**

There was also what like felt to me an explosion of opportunity to learn whilst indoors, in a range of online CPD options that I had never before seen. In lockdown confinement as a consequence of the pandemic, new doors opened to access clinical training internationally online.

One such event was the Institute of Gestalt Italy’s online conference presentation ‘Dialogues on psychotherapy at the time of Coronavirus’ (2020). Dan Bloom drew on Carr’s (2014) phenomenology of history to refer to “historical events” that are “outside” of “our capacity to put into categories”, since they disrupt the “ground” from which “experience emerges”. As I read Bloom’s statement, I sit with its significance. The process and impact of the pandemic may be something which is hard to name, hard to comprehend, even beyond the abilities of understanding. I contemplate how there may be no defining words, nor categories to reach towards, as lockdown can disrupt our process as human beings to be forward thinking and orientated to make future plans. A habitual sense of the familiar, is “fundamentally insecure and unstable” since “it rests on nothing” (Aho, 2020: 2).
Nothingness

Aho’s theme of nothingness represents the exposure of this ‘secret’, which has been existentially ‘hidden’ (ibid: 2) from us. It feels existentially stark, perhaps unpalatable. I value his candour and insight.

As I contemplated this theme of nothingness, it occurred to me that the COVID era may be presenting new existential territory to psychotherapists, and I wondered how therapists might be responding in relation to such a continually evolving landscape, amid its core of insecurity and instability? It was becoming clear how themes arising from the literature review with McBeath, A.G, du Plock, S., Bager-Charleson, S. (2020) were existential in nature. I was struck how existential-phenomenological approaches to therapy and research explore complex dimensions of existence, while holding space for new emergence amid the constancy of change. I would argue that such modalities are well-positioned to support the existential challenge of the pandemic.

Niblock (2021: 38) reports on a UKCP survey during the pandemic which asked members how they were experiencing remote work. Though positive, feedback highlighted areas where therapy may be impacted, and Niblock suggests additional training when moving clinical work online.

Online Disinhibition

At the Online Therapy Institute, Suler’s (2004) paper on the ‘online disinhibition’ effect is given prominence throughout their Certified Cyber Therapy training programme. The theme of ‘online disinhibition’ is an important existential dimension when working clinically online and one which is seldom included in mainstream therapy training programmes.

This concept highlights how a clients’ behaviour can be notably impacted and changed through computer-mediated communication. Many of us may be familiar with the term ‘trolling’ to describe, for example, angry or abusive comments made anonymously within social media. But the online disinhibition effect runs even deeper. There is a clear risk factor of how an online therapeutic frame can change and impact the psychological dimension of therapeutic engagement. Within one’s home environment, clients and therapists may start to behave differently on video to an in-person session and it is important to be clinically aware of this phenomenon.

Simpson, et al. (2020: 412-3) highlight how online working can “lead to greater disinhibition and openess as a result of a heightened sense of safety” and “more neutral power balance”. In particular, “the nature of exchanges has the potential to gradually become less formal and more casual”. This is not to advocate against online working, but to be aware of, and alert to, possible behavioural changes within an online therapeutic frame.

Given the mass displacement of the therapy profession into working in digital spaces, the risks within the online disinhibition effect of perceptual
distortion and erosion of the online therapy frame need careful consideration during the process of transition and throughout clinical practice online.

**Seen and Being Seen**

Existential themes of seen and being seen, how we might see our clients and how they see us, feel pertinent to sustaining authentic, reflexive therapeutic engagement, clearly stating and holding the boundaries of online therapeutic work. For therapists who are not involved in therapeutic engagement online, clients might bring their own experiences of being seen, including online disinhibition, in other ways if they are participating in, or on the receiving end, of cyberbullying, sexting and even online dating.

Swann (2020: 344-5) raises the hypothesis that many of us are “creating” or “having created for us, digital doubles” within cyberspace; “we are no longer just ourselves, but also our digital history which we author…” and over which there is little control of the tracks left by one’s internet footprint.

The organisation of friendships and relationships within cyberspace, and how clients may be ‘seen’ or not ‘seen’ whilst working online, feels worthy of further exploration.

**Presence**

Simpson, et al (2020: 416) suggests that therapists find an “equilibrium” between “establishing therapeutic boundaries within the video therapy environment whilst mindfully laying the foundations for the client’s therapeutic experience. This may in part require maintaining an active awareness of the ‘therapeutic presence’.

Staying present to clients’ experiences online is arguably key, but how do we do this while we also are in, as Draper (2021) asserts, an existential crisis? How might we work with clients online such that our co-constructed meeting place may support our relationship to be nurtured, in ways that perhaps are quite beyond descriptive language, but that may support the possibility of our existential being with one another, in that moment, to come to the foreground, and our computer medicated technology recede to the background? How does presence inform existential therapy online, and how might we in this moment, with this particular client, be open and available to their experience, in our respective contexts and life histories, such that it is therapeutically useful for the other within our online therapeutic frame?

Bloom (2020) mentioned the term ‘tele-phenomenological’ as another dimension to phenomenology when working online. Could presence be a uniquely existential and intersubjective process within a range of clinical and tele-phenomenological phenomena?
Wonder

Frank (2020: 370-1) invites our discovery of a sense of presence online, through “wondering” about the situation. This is an embodied, rather than a cognitive curiosity, wondering of how it might be for the other to share the Zoom call, at a time when “we can easily shut down the moving–feeling body as the anxiety of not knowing what to do or how to be with the other arises”.

I have often wondered how we co-create experiential encounters in our lives, in therapy and within respective situated environments. I viscerally recall a brief exchange at a New York airport with the late film director Derek Jarman. He was a lifelong advocate for inclusivity and was publicly opposed to Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 in the UK that hegemonised heteronormativity. He was also an author, artist, stage designer and gardener. It was 1993 at Newark Airport, New Jersey. I was beyond anxious as my twenty-one-year-old self approached him discreetly, as we shuffled zig zag through passport control. I felt broken after a friend had recently been suddenly killed. My life was shrouded in grief, in an environment that offered little support for its expression. Through heavy eyelids, emerging from my first long haul flight, I recognised a man living with life-limiting illness at a time when little was known about AIDS. I appreciated his work [and deeply respected his activism] and I wanted to tell him. I did so and it was a lovely moment. To this day, I still wonder what was it that impacted me so greatly, which has stayed with me, from such a brief meeting? What was it that existentially nourished my being and made me feel so seen?

Seth cited Van Manen (2014) to suggest that phenomenological research often starts with the experience of wonder:

Phenomenology is more a method of questioning that answering, realising that insights come to use in that mode of musing, reflective questioning and obsessed with sources of meaning and lived meaning. This wondering pathos for the pre-reflective experience...is the main theme that characterises the many and diverse phenomenologies.

(2021: PowerPoint slide)

Identity

The existential synthesis of how we are with ‘others’, who are always contextually situated, makes me wonder what, in the context of the pandemic, might we be learning as therapists about how we construct our identity? How are our identities being radically transformed by migrating our clinical work online? And how do we build authentic online identities within existential clinical work if we, or our clients, have versions of
ourselves online, in social media, that may not necessarily overlap with who we really are?

Kallner’s (2020: 13) research into therapists use of movement offers poignant moments into therapist’s experiences of their own identity. Reflecting on the process of transferring to online work, one participant shared, “I don’t know how to be a therapist anymore”. I caught my breath as I read this. The glimpse into the existential impact upon the profession feels profound. I wondered how therapist identity may be shaped within the range of relationships we have with others, such as family, friendships or professional relationships within our particular life contexts. And if identity is a process, has the pandemic brought therapists to a crossroads in a new existential synthesis?

**The Unknown**

In my online clinical practice, I continue to be informed through the lenses of my clients and my own respective perceptual experience of how the process is co-emergent and shaped within our unique moment-by-moment online encounter. However, as lockdown restrictions ease across the country, I wonder how society may be changing, and what a return to face-to-face therapy work would look like, if or when deemed safe to do so.

How are therapists being impacted existentially? Specifically, I wonder ‘to mask’ or not ‘to mask’? Do we work with clients who are vaccinated, unvaccinated or both? And how might we enquire? Do we enquire? How might we ethically navigate this new existential landscape?

These themes raise increasing questions for our profession as we preserve the wellbeing of our clients and ourselves from the risk of infection transmission.

**Freedom**

As I approach the end of these thematic considerations, I wanted to share my own personal reflections on freedom. In February 2020, I travelled nine hours by train through Storm Dennis to attend a training course on the south coast of England. Reflecting back, I had no idea what this would inadvertently be preparing me for. Isolation before more isolation.

In the evenings, I continued with my own work as a trainer and, due to work volume, I had spent the first four days in my hotel without venturing outside. Cabin fever took shape as an unwelcome companion. On the fourth day, just before sunset, I managed to get outside. The air felt crisp, the sea wild, as I walked the short distance to see the daily murmuration of starlings on Brighton Pier. They were breathtaking, swirls of dancing, living beauty as the sun sank behind the English Channel. These images were to become my defining memory of freedom, their sweeping and swooping dances...
above the shimmering waves, before the pandemic arrived two weeks later.

Every time I see an image of starlings murmuring, I now think of freedom. I hope to one day return to Brighton Pier to reclaim my own existential freedom from those pre-COVID moments alongside its beautiful, natural seascape.

**Concluding Reflection**

In this paper I have identified a number of themes in the literature which have been published on therapists’ experiences of clinical work during the pandemic, to date.

It is interesting that these themes all, to varying degrees, appear to reflect the experience of not just challenge, but specifically existential challenge. While this is the case for the great majority of the literature, we can see that the existential nature of the challenge posed by COVID is clearly addressed by existential-phenomenological approaches to psychotherapy. This is, perhaps, not surprising, as attuning to experiential emergence, drawing upon phenomenology as a means of embodied enquiry and a philosophy for living, make existential-phenomenological approaches well positioned to support the clinical challenges of the COVID era.

This paper identifies a need to develop research in this area; to consider how existential therapists are engaging with new ways of working; and to explore and identify implications for clinical practice.

*Interested readers who may wish to contribute to further exploration of how existential practitioners are responding to existential crisis are invited to contact me to discuss: claire.spiller@metanoia.ac.uk*

**Claire Spiller** is a UKCP-accredited Gestalt Psychotherapist, PhD research student at the Metanoia Institute and a Certified Cyber Therapist trained by the Online Therapy Institute. She is a member of the Society for Existential Analysis and particularly interested in the integration of theory to practice from the existential and phenomenological roots of Gestalt therapy, including Brentano, Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.
Contact: claire.spiller@metanoia.ac.uk

**References**


An Exploration of Some Connections Between Existentialism, Education and Psychotherapy Teaching

Martin Adams

Abstract
There are three parts to this paper. The first reviews how some existential philosophers have talked about education. The second considers how this has been used by subsequent writers. And the third links all this to the education of psychotherapists.

Key Words
Existentialism, banking method, Friere, Socratic method, pedagogy, process, praxis, psychotherapy

Existential Philosophers and Education
Although little has been written by the philosophers explicitly on the subject of education, it is possible to draw some conclusions from their writings.

Søren Kierkegaard
The issue of what is meant by age-appropriate education is clearly a live issue for Kierkegaard. His upbringing was as a special son who was immersed in the world of his sombre and increasingly oppressive father, and reflecting on these times in he wrote, “As a child I was strictly and austerely brought up in Christianity; humanly speaking, crazily brought up. A child crazily travestied as a melancholy old man” (quoted in Lowrie, 1942: 50).

Expanding on this theme, Kierkegaard (1941: 523) says, “To cram Christianity into a child is a thing that cannot be done; for it is a general rule that everyone comprehends only what he has use for, and the child has no decisive use for Christianity.” And on such an education he says in his journal that,

*The most dangerous case is not when the father is a free thinker, and not when he is a hypocrite. No, the danger is when he is a god-fearing man, when the child is inwardly and deeply convinced of it and yet in spite of all this observes that a profound unrest is deeply hidden in his soul.’ A consequence of this is that such a child will come to the conclusion ‘that after all God is not infinite love.*

(quoted in Lowrie 1942: 51).
Being taught by his father took the form of theological and philosophical discussions that stretched his imagination and intellectual capacity to breaking point and, importantly, did not leave any space for him to wonder about what he was being told.

These points indicate his sensitivity to the issue of what we now call age-appropriate knowledge and age-appropriate education. Kierkegaard is saying that children are just not equipped to deal either with the content of what he was exposed to or the process of how he was exposed to it without having their worldview distorted, if not corrupted.

Taking the issue of teaching and learning further he suggested that the main duty of a teacher is not simply to provide facts. He says,

No, to be a teacher in the right sense is to be a learner. Instruction begins when you, the teacher, learn from the learner, put yourself in his place so that you may understand what he understands and in the way he understands it...

(Kierkegaard, quoted in Bretall, 1946: 335).

Such learning, therefore, is mutual and any learning which is more than simple imparting of factual knowledge requires ‘trust, friendship, and support’; and that all these are necessary for both effective reflection and also for rational discourse (ibid: 306).

Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre

While Sartre made some oblique references to education, Beauvoir (2015) was more characteristically forthright. She argues that children have an innate desire to explore and shape the world and through this they get to understand the temporal meaning of their actions. She calls this desire their ‘natural freedom’. It is as much of a given as the facticity of the world and she distinguishes it from the later moral freedom, which is the freedom grounded by a personally chosen project and which acknowledges ambiguity and the freedom of others.

Initially, the child is dependent for his survival on the care and attention of others and usually the child lives in a comfortable and continuous present, and is oblivious of the ways that randomness and chance shape his life. As she puts it, the child is ‘metaphysically privileged’ (ibid: 39). The child is protected from having to take responsibility for any life-changing decisions. Assuming the carer is consistently attentive, the child will feel not just that he is freely loved but also that his own love is freely received and a sense of mutuality will develop. Children, she says, need to experience the joys of freedom before they meet the anxieties of freedom.

By virtue of his natural freedom, the child will learn to play according to his own interests and will not need direction. In play, the world can be
explored with no costs, only the benefits of discovering the limits of possibility. In a reflection on the meaning of freely chosen projects that anticipates Beauvoir’s move into the political arena, she says:

*There is no more obnoxious way to punish a man than to force him to perform acts which make no sense to him, as when one empties and fills the same ditch indefinitely, [or] when one forces a schoolboy to copy lines.*

( ibid: 31).

An education system that values order over imagination, and favours premature fixing of the future in terms of career choices, will be saving up psychological alienation for later in life when the need to overcome accumulated bad faith will emerge.

Preferring to think existentially rather than biologically or chronologically, Beauvoir uses the term ‘adolescence’ to refer to the time in life, when we “discover the human character of the reality about [us]” (ibid: 41). Prompted by this, we start to get a sense of our temporality; that we have a past behind and a future ahead that we have responsibility for. For many people, including herself, it was between the ages of fourteen and nineteen, but for others if may be earlier, later, or even never.

In her case, it led to an awareness of how political ideology and personal value systems shaped people’s sense of identity, actions and relationships. Before she was able to support herself from her writing she was a secondary school teacher, and the teaching methods she employed, as described by her biographer (Bair, 1990) seem to owe little to the traditional French model where the teacher is the expert and the pupils’ job is to absorb the teachers knowledge.

Sartre himself wrote little directly on education but some implications can be drawn out. *Words*, Sartre’s autobiography (1964), which does not pretend to be a historical record, is a rich and many layered work (Whitmire, 2006). On one level it is about his first years, but it also spans over a hundred years and has multiple viewpoints. He talks about how his relationship with his grandfather influenced his choice to become a writer, a creator of stories. He sees both reading and writing as active. Reading is just as much an act of imagination because when we read, we also write, we interpret; we make up stories about what we have read and how we might be in the stories. Reading, for Sartre, is analogous to being a student, to learning. And it cannot be done without the freedom to create.

**Paulo Freire**

Although strictly speaking not a philosopher, the work of Paulo Freire has much in common with the work of Sartre and Beauvoir, whose work
he knew well. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), Friere describes conventional education as the ‘banking method’, because it involves the active teacher depositing knowledge into the passive pupils. He says that in the banking method:

...knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing.

And that

...the more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world.

(ibid: 47)

The more that students collect and catalogue knowledge, the less they can be creative with it and, more importantly, the less they will question the dominant narrative of the power differential between the teacher and the taught. In addition, after qualification, as they move from learner to teacher, they can too easily start to adopt, reinforce and even promote this dominant narrative. Friere says, “The truly committed [must adopt instead] a concept of men as conscious beings, and consciousness as consciousness directed towards the world” (ibid: 52). What can then result is that the “teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students […] They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (ibid: 53).

In their critique of the way social situations are accounted for, both Sartre and Freire made use of the term *praxis*, from Aristotle, which refers to the activity of free people. Laing also makes use of it and he makes a distinction between *praxis* and what he calls process. For him as well as for Sartre and Freire, whereas praxis has human authority, process does not (Howarth-Williams, 2014). Human interactions that are judged to have no human origin are said to occur through process. They are mystified because no one takes responsibility for them; they seem to just happen of their own accord or are mediated biologically, in which case they are similarly removed from the arena of human responsibility. Examples are when someone may say, “I couldn’t help it” or “You made me do it” or even, “It’s God’s will”. Laing (1967: 30), talking about the necessary move from process to praxis, referring explicitly to the therapeutic relationship but implicitly to all relationships, says:

As he becomes de-alienated he is able first of all to become aware of them, if he has not already done so, and then to take the second, even more crucial, step of progressively realising that these are things he does or has done to himself. Process becomes converted back to praxis, the patient becomes an agent.
Freire makes the relationship of process to *praxis* in education clear when he says, “Through praxis, oppressed people can acquire a critical awareness of their own condition, and, […], struggle for liberation” (1972: 36).

**Martin Heidegger**

Heidegger’s initial question, what does it mean to be human?, has implications for the nature of education. In his later work he considered the nature of thinking and he distinguished between what he called meditative and calculative thinking.

Calculative thinking is practical and functional and is our habitual mode of thinking. It considers the people and objects in the world in terms of how they can be collected, classified and controlled. It is the banking method and it expects standardised results within a given time scale. These methods also reinforce our inauthenticity (Crawford, 2010). Western society has a tendency towards this technological view (Heidegger, 1977) and it is embedded in the language we use and in our assessment methods. We find it easy to ask “How much?” or “Why?” or “When?”. And we talk of catharsis as being central to cure in psychotherapy. Manualised versions of psychotherapy are ways that calculative thinking, the banking method, is applied to psychotherapy.

If calculative thinking is designed to reduce alternatives and produce answers, then meditative thinking is designed to increase alternatives and produce questions. Its purpose is to explore meaning. It makes no expectation of the result, or even that there will be any result beyond being open to the mystery and wonder of existence.

Meditative thinking cannot be forced, it can only happen when the circumstances are right.

Heidegger uses the word *Gelassenheit* to describe something of how to make the circumstances right. He says that we need to “meditate on what is closest; upon that which concerns us […] here, on this patch of home ground; now, in the present hour of history” (1966: 47). Just be here, now, and ask what is it like.

It is by being phenomenological that we allow existential issues to come to light.

**A Review of Some Subsequent Work**

Morris (1966: 110) suggests that education is the drawing out of our human nature, however that is defined and that, existentially, “if education is to be truly human, it must somehow awaken awareness in the learner; existential awareness of himself as a single subjectivity present in the world”. This is echoed by Olson (1961).

Dreyfus (1991: 10) agrees, saying that an existentially informed education would be to discover “how to make sense of our ability to make sense of
things, and [...] a feeling for the importance of this very obscure question”. This awareness is not abstract, it is always personal; it refers to my awareness of myself, now, as an active agent with freedom and responsibility. It follows that anything that promotes this awareness can be considered consistent with an existentially informed education.

There is a developmental dimension to this that Beauvoir was also aware of, and Morris’ term is the ‘existential moment’ (1966: 114). It is, typically, when young people realise for the first time that they have responsibility for their own lives. Spiegelberg (1961) calls it ‘I-am-me’ moment and Paul Tillich (2000) calls it the first encounter with meaninglessness. From this moment on, life is different; the world is a different place. It is the first true awareness of “Why me?” “Why here?” “Why now?”.

With respect to the content of what is taught, whereas some writers (for example, Yahyaei & Mahini, 2017) suggest that the teaching of subjects like mathematics that have fixed answers are incompatible with teaching methods that preference human freedom and subjectivity, Detmer (2005) disagrees, saying that Sartre’s entire project can allow for this because even with these subjects the act of learning is a subjective act that involves questioning. The consequence is that any subject can be taught existentially.

Detmer (ibid) suggests that there are three principles that derive from Sartre’s philosophy: firstly, that teachers should question the epistemology of their teaching method to ensure that it does not reinforce the banking method; secondly, that teachers should reinforce that education is not simply a matter of memorising and recalling information; and thirdly, that teachers should discuss the political and moral implications of what they are doing. This last point resonates with Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s principle of being ‘engagé’ (Adams 2018). For them, our being-in-the-world means that we are always engaged with the world. Our existential task is to find a way to put this into action that stays true to our situation and to the givens of existence, and then to commit to it. The personal is political. Neither Sartre and Beauvoir taught formally but they both saw their writing as a form of teaching that they hoped would inspire people to ask questions of their lives and the world they were in. In Nausea (1938), for example, Sartre wants us to ask, “Suppose that was me,…What would that be like?…Would I do that, or not?”. He wanted his books to be readers’ books not writers’ books.

With respect to the aims of the existentially informed teacher, Morris (1966: 135) suggests that the teaching should focus around embodying the following the existential principles of choice, freedom and responsibility. And that rather than using conventional banking methods of teaching which would undermine these aims, Morris favours Socratic methods. But it is rarely acknowledged that there are two versions of the Socratic method. One is of the teacher who is the expert and leads the students by astute
and perceptive questioning towards the answers but without saying what they are. Because the teacher knows the answers, this method runs the risk common to both teaching and therapy of influencing by covert suggestion and/or degenerating into the banking method.

The other involves the teacher as co-researcher. Morris (1996: 137) says that this latter method is preferable existentially but it is also challenging because:

...the teacher will concentrate on asking those questions that he does not know the answer to. In the most literal and profound ways, he will learn along with his students. This understanding of teaching [...] places the teacher under heavy obligations of imagination and insight. [...] But difficulty must be measured against yield, namely, the possible awakening in the student to his awareness of choice, freedom and responsibility in his own selfhood.

He is in no doubt that the difficulty is not just worth it but ethically necessary.

While this point about the Socratic method is of central importance, because the teacher will also have to deliver the syllabus and assess the subsequent work, the existentially informed teacher will need, at every moment, to work out how to weave in existential principles into the teaching process.

This challenge is about more than technique, it is about skill, and skills are very different from techniques.

Existential therapists have long been suspicious of techniques, and with good reason. As Frankl (2000: 26) says, “we can see the therapist as a technician only if we have first viewed the patient as some sort of machine”.

Techniques are manualised sequences of actions which are done without full attention or personal commitment, and the danger is that when a theoretical principle is translated into a technique all those involved, both therapists and clients, become dehumanised. This is what happens in the banking method. This can also be the case when an awareness exercise taken from a book of exercises is done without the teacher fully understanding its power and appropriateness for the group in question. The teacher always needs to practice the exercise on herself firstly to evaluate its potential and secondly to change it to make it more personal.

Skills are uniquely human qualities; they are owned ways of being and the process of learning skills is dynamic, life-long and involves unlearning as well as learning. It also demands total openness and involvement (Adams 2016). It is existential. An action becomes a skill when we own it and make it a part of who we are, rather than just something we do whereas a
technician has to read the manual to find out what to do next. Moreover, skills can only be learnt by trial and error and making mistakes is necessary. The only true mistake is one we do not learn from.

Kakkori (2017) looks at this subject from a Heideggerian perspective and summarises four principles of what she calls Gelassenheit education:

1. There is a wondering, a natural curiosity, and an increased ability to ask questions.
2. There is no distinction between the educator and the educated.
3. Freedom is the sense of possibility that we encounter in the world with others.
4. No one has exclusive access to the truth.

Although the teacher and the student are intertwined, she echoes Morris in saying that to educate is more difficult than to be educated because the teacher must learn to let her students learn. She says:

_We might go so far as to say that this means that the teacher is less sure of her materials than those who learn are of theirs. There is no room for the authority of the “know-it-all” in the genuine relationship between teacher and learners[…]. To become a good teacher is completely different than becoming a famous professor._

She is at pains to maintain that such a model does not advocate an ‘anything goes’ policy, because as Gur-Ze’ev (2002: 69) points out, “often these projects introduce pedagogies for the oppressed”. This reinforces Freire’s point that, if the epistemology is not examined, the alternative may simply replicate the very thing it claims to undermine.

Kakkori’s (2017) ideas also make use of Heidegger’s two sorts of solicitude; meditative ‘leaping-ahead solicitude’ and the more calculative ‘leaping-in solicitude’ (Karban, 2017) concluding that the existentially informed teacher will tend towards the former, as the latter represents the banking method.

A Heideggerian model of education therefore is one in which the teacher acknowledges the learner’s capacity for autonomy and will modify her practice so that an optimum amount of freedom is always present. Too much will undermine autonomy as easily as too little. The skill comes in knowing how much is enough.

Taking Morris’ point about how challenging it is for the existentially informed teacher, Criticos (1993: 145) says that in order “to reflect critically, we must […] examine the underlying beliefs and assumptions that affect how we make sense of the experience”. This is echoed by Walters (2008: 113), who coins the term ‘transformative learning’, and says that an
existentially informed teacher will always be concerned with trying to articulate “the unseen and the unspoken” in both teacher and taught.

This is not always, or perhaps ever, easy for those involved. As May (1989: 123) says, “a human being will not change […], until forced to do so by suffering. Advice, persuasion, requests from the outside will effect only a temporary change in the cloak of the personality”.

It is at this point that the kind of existential learning that can take place in the classroom comes very close to the kind that takes place in the consulting room because such a teacher is certainly not using the banking method, or even being simply an astute questioner. He is only interested in what he does not yet know. And this can only be done with a faith that something will emerge…sometime.

Walters (2008: 116) goes on to ask “Where are such classrooms to be found?” Rather than thinking in terms of institution, syllabus, subject or nation, he suggests that since the teacher-learner relationship is central, such classrooms can exist anywhere where the context does not actively prevent it and also where the teacher is keen to promote it. He also notes that such learning that arises in the existential classroom “is likely to become increasingly powerful as the teacher/facilitator makes it clear that she possesses no interest in judging, diagnosing or diverting the learner from an experience that is personally relevant and meaningful” (ibid: 116).

With respect to what activates the existential teacher may employ, Walters (ibid: 116), drawing on Taylor (2000) suggests the use of activities that promote exploration of alternative personal perspectives, and Cranton (1996, 2002) promotes the use of experiential techniques such as role-play, journal writing such as Bolton (2014) advocates, and the sharing of life histories whereas Christie, et al (2015) describe a range of exercises like questionnaires, interviews and discussion groups, but give no more information.

In a rare phenomenological research study of what it is like to be a university educator, Spier (2018) notes that what sparked his interest was that the teaching styles that he felt obliged to follow as a lecturer were uniformly dull for both educator and student. He draws out four points:

(1) It is hard for university educators to juggle the pressures of administrative tasks with the job of facilitating learning.
(2) University educators need to be alive to the moments of genuine person-to-person contact because they are what makes the job worth doing.
(3) University educators should not forget what it was like to be a student. If we forget our past, we forget to be in the present and retreat into technique.
(4) Echoing Heidegger (1966: 47) and Spence & Smythe (2008), he says that rather than asking abstract questions, we should stay with the
everyday experiences that come up in discussion. Rather than asking the question “What is gives life meaning?” ask “What gives your life meaning?”

**Existentialism and the Education of Psychotherapists**

The work of psychotherapy teaching in general and existential therapy teaching in particular is relatively undocumented and under-researched. There are a number of references to what the therapist needs to learn in order to work existentially and phenomenologically (for example, Adams, 2001, 2013, 2016; Spinelli, 2015; Deurzen & Adams, 2011, 2016; Deurzen, et al, 2019), but nothing about how this is to be taught. In fairness to these works, they did not set out to include lesson plans but many of them include generic exercises, thought experiments, that could be adapted for use in classroom situations. Lewis & Streitfield (1973) refer to many more. Consequently, if they wish to use the exercises each individual teacher will need to do make them personal and relevant to the context. If they do not, the exercises remain as techniques and consequently run the risk of manualising therapy education and replicating the banking method.

With respect to particular activities, Maguire, et al (1984) notes the value of working in triads to practice skills and to get feedback. This practice is as universal as it is undocumented. Yalof (2015), echoing Spier (2018), but talking about psychoanalytic training, notes that psychoanalytic ideas are usually taught in a dry, mechanistic way. Zepf & Gerlach (2013) emphasise the importance of selecting teachers based not on their theoretical knowledge but on their teaching ability.

Raubolt (2006) notes how disruptive power games in training institutes can be and suggests supervisory and training models based on empathy, respect for subjective experiences, and democratic principles.

From a UK perspective of training therapy students, Asheri, et al (2005) describe a way of making the course content and course process inseparable. And with respect to skills practice, they also document the value of using the ‘fishbowl’ technique. All these processes, they suggest, will also lead to a greater understanding of the socio-political dimension of therapeutic work.

Also concerned with the integration of theoretical and personal learning, Meakins (2019) gives a rare detailed description of an activity that while it is an integral part of the course it is deliberately kept outside the formal assessment process to avoid contamination.

Macaskie, et al (2013) suggest that therapists at different stages of training should be actively encouraged to share learning experiences and also suggest that the dominant apprenticeship model of training is inappropriate as it implies mastery and linearity when in fact the skills, theories and values of psychotherapy are continually being learned and transformed by both
learners and teachers together. But they also note, crucially, that this can only happen if students feel safe enough, as Meekums (2007: 18) says, to think out loud about their embodied experience without being judged. Just as they hope their clients would be.

Echoing Spier, they also emphasise the importance of the staff group being as open to their own embodied experiencing as the students, and advocate group supervision that focuses on their role as teachers.

Another aspect of training Macaskie, et al (2013) reflect on is that of personal therapy. While its effect can never be guaranteed, their experience generally corroborates both Rizq & Target (2008) and Rake & Paley’s (2009) research which suggests that therapists learned more about themselves and how to be a therapist from their own experiences as a client than from anything they learnt in the classroom.

The issue of the needs of the psychotherapy teaching community was researched by Rutten & Hulme (2013) by interviewing staff on HE counselling and psychotherapy courses. They concluded that much of the training was delivered according to tradition, which is to say that it is done the way it has always been done. Echoing the sentiment of Yalof (2015) and Zepf & Gerlach (2013), they say that:

There is some doubt whether the current prevalent teaching practice would stand up to scrutiny’ [and that] ‘building evidence-based teaching in HE and Counselling pedagogy is seen as a useful and under-researched area.

(2013: 7)

A challenge to this, they noted, was that many of the people working in psychotherapy education have other jobs outside the institution. This means that there is often little time or opportunity for reflection and sharing of good practice. If this was to change it would inevitably have financial implications. This echoes the sentiment of Spier’s (2018) concluding questions to university educators:

• How do you stay in touch with the reasons you got into the work in the first place?
• What do you do to stay in touch with other university educators, such that you can talk to each other about what makes the job worth doing?

Conclusion
This review of the relationship between existentialism, education and teaching psychotherapy has revealed not only that they are all fundamentally about personal learning, but that the difference between the practice of existential therapy and the education of existential therapists is only one of context.
It has also revealed that the aims of the banking method of education, in all its variants, is at odds with this practice because implicit in the banking method is the passivity of the learner.

Existential therapy teaching is in a privileged position because it is usually done in small groups of not more than twenty, and supervision and seminar groups rarely more than six. This learning context, especially if it is done in the round, can mitigate and may even counter the effects of the banking method so much that its can be challenged in other contexts.

Much has been written both about the philosophical underpinning and also on the practice of existential therapy. Considering the overlap between existential therapy and the teaching of existential therapy, it is curious therefore that more attention has not been given to the way we teach and what its existential and phenomenological intentions should be. This paper is the first to do this.

As a first venture into this important field, this paper has not attempted to delineate the many ways that existential therapy should be taught, only to outline the basic principles. The practice of teaching existential therapy is so far almost entirely undocumented.

In the end though, whether teaching is done existentially or not will come down not to the regulations, nor to the course descriptors, nor to the course title or content, but to the way-of-being of the individual teacher who will need to embrace the challenge of not only asking the questions which he or she does not know the answer to, but also encouraging the students to ask the questions to which they do not know the answer to.

This means letting go of certainty and embodying the primacy of human freedom, in the full knowledge that what follows cannot be predicted.

This being the case, the principles of existentialism and phenomenology and their epistemologies can give some guidance if the individual teacher is wondering, as they will, whether they are teaching existentially or just teaching about existentialism.


**References**


What Does It Mean to ‘Teach Existentially’, and How Can We Teach Existentialism Existentially?

Simon du Plock, Martin Adams & Rosemary Lodge

Abstract
This paper documents an online discussion conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the course of this, the authors note that psychotherapy teaching is extremely under-documented, under-researched and under-evaluated, and they formulate some preliminary ideas about how existential therapy can be taught in a way that is congruent with the ethos of existential philosophy with the aim of encouraging further work on this important area.

Key Words
Psychotherapy teaching, teaching existentially, transformative learning

Introduction
Existential analysis has always sought to include dialogue and debate alongside the more traditional theoretical papers that academic journals ordinarily publish, and readers have often indicated their interest in such pieces, citing how they can provide a format for the accessible exploration of ideas of direct relevance for therapeutic practice. With this in mind, we offer the following paper in the hope that it will resonate with readers and may stimulate further discussion about the way we teach psychotherapy, and especially how we may teach existential therapy in a way congruent with the tenets of existential philosophy.

The genesis of this paper was an email exchange between the editors of Existential Analysis, Dr Martin Adams (MA) and Prof Simon du Plock (SdP), along with Dr Rosemary Lodge (RL) and Zoe Gelis (ZG), about how Rosemary and Zoe’s presentation ‘To plan or not to plan? That is the (a priori) question’ that was given at the November 2020 Society for Existential Analysis Conference, might be structured for publication in Existential Analysis. The presentation itself took the form of a discussion of the meaning and relevance of making plans, and the resulting paper, which was published in the January 2021 edition of the Society’s Journal, sets out an abridged version of their dialogue.

The process of converting what had been an online presentation by two presenters, each on their own device, to an audience also online was challenging. This was particularly so, as the paper as first submitted mentioned
an experiential exercise that would involve the ‘readers’ own plans. As this seemed important to document, the editors (MA and SdP), were curious about how the exercise developed and instigated an email exchange to clarify and elucidate the issue. All of us quickly became aware in our four-way exchange that there was a kind of parallel process in action: it was interesting, in such online fragmented and detached times, to get a sense of relationship between the two presenters and to see something developing (which itself was not planned). The innovative way in which the presentation, and in turn the paper, was conceived and delivered, and the value and practical implications of including an experiential exercise, prompted the four of us to reflect on the ways in which we attempt to teach existential therapy.

At an early point in this discussion, Martin Adams noted that “Psychotherapy teaching is extremely under-documented, under-researched and under-evaluated” and went on to ask “If you did the exercise, how did you run it? It would be good to know not just what you did in the conference, but also to know how you did it online, and what was the result”. This observation struck a chord with all of us. Rosemary Lodge replied, “Many thanks for your feedback on the paper – you have raised some interesting points. The second of your points is particularly interesting and would probably make for a fascinating paper in its own right (i.e. the process of psychotherapy teaching). The process of psychotherapy teaching online then adds another level on top of that”. Simon du Plock then added, “This is an interesting area about which as you correctly say little has been written. What there is, at least as regards existential therapy, has largely I think come from Martin! (Adams 2021) I have published a couple of chapters in books about reflexive practice which have some connection to this topic, and I published (with Professor Paul Barber, a Gestalt theorist and practitioner) a paper on teaching and supervising doctoral candidates…but that was some years ago now. So I would be interested to develop these ideas, perhaps leading to a piece of research. I always enjoy brainstorming ideas and writing”.

Having discovered a shared energy around the topic of ‘How to teach psychotherapy’, we set up a Zoom meeting to discuss this further, and what follows is an edited version of our exploration which continued sporadically over the next few months. Our Zoom meeting confirmed our collective interest in this area and began a process of defining our terms. We did not record our conversation, but the next day Rosemary Lodge initiated the email exchange, and in the process summarised some of our discussion.

Rosemary Lodge (RL): I thought I would write straight away with a few notes that I made during our Zoom meeting. It seems that we agreed that there was very little written, and no research, on teaching existential therapy. Overlaps with student-centred learning and student-led learning
were noted. However, in relationship to other subject areas such as English Literature, psychotherapy training involves many stakeholders – regulatory bodies and clients and so there is a need for objective standards – it isn’t enough just to ask people to reflect on how they feel.

An overlap with psychotherapy was mentioned. In therapy we teach clients to trust their own capacity to find their own meaning within the existential givens and in relationship to the world and others. Perhaps we do something similar in training – perhaps we use a mixture of the objective and the subjective. We use ourselves as trainers to feedback to trainees something about their relationship to us and to the world and we also model something, perhaps by being authentic and linking the theory to our own experience. We share something of ourselves to the class – in a professional and appropriate way.

**Martin Adams (MA):** I’ve now been involved in the frontline of counselling and psychotherapy teaching and education for over thirty years, the latter part of that time in the existential tradition. Prior to that I taught psychoanalysis and the integrative tradition. I have also taught at all levels from Certificate up to Doctoral level and theory, practice, self-development and both clinical and academic supervision.

I recently (Adams, 2021a) completed a Doctorate in Public Works (DPW) and this allowed me the opportunity to concentrate reflexively not so much on the content of what I taught, of what needed to be learnt so that the students and trainees would have a good chance of passing, but on the process of the teaching; how I taught. And, also on the way the content and process interlocked. The process of teaching was very rarely, if ever, addressed in discussions I had with peers or line managers and I don’t think I am alone in the profession for not having had any formal (or informal) teacher training of any sort. I learnt on the job, and also from how I was taught, which was usually not very well. It now seems me very odd that so much time and energy is put into ensuring good therapeutic practice through training of counsellors and psychotherapists, but almost none put into psychotherapy teaching.

Addressing the process of teaching, how I taught (and also why I taught that way) led me into areas I had only barely considered before, but a phrase that kept coming up for me was the difference between teaching about existentialism and teaching existentially. Although it was backed up by evidence of the impact of my work, the DPW was a reflexive, personal piece of work and I would be curious to know if this phrase has any meaning, any resonance, for any of you, my colleagues, and if so what.

**Simon du Plock (SdP):** I am just going to throw myself into this ‘conversation’ without worrying to much at this point about structure or continuity, as
I find I get my energy from playing with ideas in a group (usually a small and supportive group so there is room to do the work and not feel too inhibited), so yesterday I felt very energised and I know if I do this in isolation I can lose threads, get discouraged and go off into numerous different directions.

Actually, I think that relates to the project of looking at what it means to teach existentially: there is something here for me about creating and holding a space in which each participant is able to create their own meanings, privileging subjectivity over objectivity, having guiding questions (so that ‘truth’ is not entirely subjective – if we go to a place where ‘my truth’ is an end point there can be no dialogue or common ground, or in fact ‘truth’, merely an agreement to sit in our own little boxes… the current dilemma of democracy perhaps illustrates this danger) and knowledge is co-constructed and neither top-down nor bottom-up and tested in relation to each participant’s world view. I guess what I am edging towards is that the way we are going about creating this conversation is analogous to some extent to the question of what it means to teach existentially, as distinct from how we teach existentialism.

I think, also, there is a link to how we practice existential psychotherapy (or perhaps, better, ‘therapy’), and indeed how we engage with the world in general. By which I think I mean that teaching existentially honours what we profess about the relational nature of being. I think there is a thread I want to pursue here when I have adequate time. But something about teaching existentially not being hived off too distinctly from living existentially…I don’t intend here to float off into some woolly theoretical place at all, quite the opposite. Rather, I’m reminding myself that when I stumbled upon existential philosophy, and later existential therapy, it ‘stuck’ with me because it proposed a way of living which was rather frightening, but potentially also rather fulfilling. The sensation I had was similar to that which I experienced when, some years earlier, I was introduced to sociology, and particularly Marxism, and that became, at least for a while, the lens through which I made sense of the world. Existential teaching, then, seemed to me less something to ‘do’, and rather more something to ‘be’ (though that may sound clumsy). And something communal and collegial, rather than expert-led. As I write, the image of a ‘lab’ comes to mind, with facilitator and participants (the two roles to some extent inter-changeable), carrying out thought experiments and experiential work to test the extent to which the philosophies under consideration assist each of us, ‘speak’ to each of us. Free-will, self-determinism and individual search for meaning all feel like key themes, I think.

This brings me back to therapeutic practice to some extent, where I find it can be powerful to be transparent with clients and quite often suggest thought experiments – though I am clear in my own mind that there are
important distinctions between teaching and therapy, and I tend not to go in the direction of psycho-education. As it happens, I have first-hand experience of this from being diagnosed a while back with ME, and receiving CBT at a specialist NHS clinic. It didn’t work for me…in fact I often left sessions feeling more unwell than when I arrived!

I am aware there are lots of directions we can take in this conversation, and it’s early days. When we met on Zoom things came up to me about authenticity, and the necessity to embody a particular way of being in order to not be engulfed by a group…ontological insecurity comes in here for me. Also, the difference between student-led and student-centred learning, and the literature and history of each of these movements. There is also some useful literature in educational and social work journals, and of course it feels important to bear in mind that existentialism is a practical philosophy which problematises, so we can use it to problematise ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’ and think about the relationship between the two.

I also recall we began to talk about how teaching existentially is always in a context, and that context is about, in part, outcomes, grades, assessments… I have published a number of papers and book chapters on various aspects of academic and clinical supervision that touch on this to some extent (du Plock 2009a, 2009b; du Plock & Barber, 2009; du Plock 2007). I think I will go back to these and check what I wrote, but I know I emphasised the co-created nature of supervision and that may be relevant.

I feel lighter and clearer seeing my thoughts on the page. Hopefully some of the above resonates with you all.

**RL:** The thing that comes to mind for me when thinking about being authentic and relational in teaching existential therapy is something about using my relationship with the students/trainees as the vehicle through which the learning takes place, in the same way that I might do in therapy. I have an experience of the trainees, the way they think and behave and relate to me. I notice in myself what my response to them is - do I feel silenced by them, do they seemed to be silenced by me, are they able to be dialogical, do they hear what I say and interpret it through the lens of their own experience or do they immediately take it to an intellectual place? Do they try to disrupt the class discussions, or dominate the discussions, are they anxious about speaking up or lacking any sense of how they might be experienced by others? All this is raw data that tells me something about the kinds of people they are and therefore the kinds of therapists that they might become.

Picking up on a thread that you mentioned, Simon, about relating the material to your own experience, I think that includes my experience of the trainees, who all have an impact on me but in different ways. Perhaps I really enjoy the contributions of one trainee, perhaps another seems to
know more than me, so when creating a theoretical lecture it makes me anxious. Another trainee may be dismissive or undermining of me and this might make me feel attacked. Part of the trainer-trainee relationship is driven by my own way of being in the world, but as trainer I am supposed to know myself a little better and be more aware of the relationship dynamics and their potential meanings. As part of my own training, I have had extensive therapy and have more experience than trainees so that I am perhaps more aware of my blind spots and vulnerabilities. This perhaps allows me to digest what is happening, make sense of it and feed it back to the trainees in a palatable form with delicate timing and judgment in a way that they can hear without being defensive. It has to be at just that right level – not completely within the range of what they are aware of (they find this boring and unhelpful) nor completely outside of what they are aware of (this provokes defensiveness, aggression or disbelief) – it has to be just on the edge of awareness. In pedagogical terms I guess we call this the ‘zone of proximal development’ (Vygotsky, 1978).

Colaizzi (1973) contrasted experiential learning with taught learning. He suggested that genuine learning gives the learner a new meaning of the nature of reality. This might tie in with this subjective/objective balance. He writes about the learner’s being in the world as being restructured in a personal and bodily way in experiential learning, which I feel captures well what is going on in an existential training. It is about meaning and is a reflective and painful process that challenges our current thinking and behaviour patterns, requiring us to make an existential choice. Colaizzi also describes the genuine learning process as a movement towards the authentic self that requires us to put something at stake to restructure our world by existentially transforming our self and life, taking responsibility for our own existence. This might tie in with the importance of the tutor being authentic and taking responsibility.

**SdP:** I want to share a train of thought which is running for me, at the moment I am not sure where, but I have a hunch it could be meaningful. I am enrolled on a fairly introductory seminar on European film. Just began so this is my third class. On Zoom, of course, and quite a large group. Now the subject matter is if long-standing interest to me. Film, particularly European film, was important for me in my journey of moving from a semi-rural childhood to young adult life in a big city, creating a sense of identity, etc. These films were/are, in various ways, concerned with ‘the human condition’, ‘problems of living’, essentially what it means to be a human being. And they deal with human psychological situations in a realist manner.

So, I have been surprised to notice that I feel detached from the class,
even rather bored. And I have been wondering about that. At the same
time, I have been reading George Saunders’ new book *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain (In which four Russians give a master class on writing, reading and life)*. Rather a long title but, essentially, he guides the reader through seven classic stories by Chekhov, Turgenev, Tolstoy and Gogol (very much the canon) and pairs them with essays which analyse how they work. Could be rather dry and top-down, but the important thing is he foregrounds and works with our subjective experience of the stories. I think this is when the penny dropped for me and I realised the film class (perhaps necessarily) is designed to communicate information – facts and dates about movements in the linear history of film. It is top-down. The book, in contrast, invites the reader to bring themselves into the frame. Saunders offers various models for thinking about stories, but he insists none are ‘correct’ or sufficient. If a model appeals to us, he says, then use it. If not, then discard it. This is not to go so far as to say there is no canon, no generally acknowledged body of knowledge – as we might in student-led learning – it is not all about subjectivity. Rather, the knowledge which is out there can be used by us as tools to find our own ‘truths’. I am wary about plucking examples of Eastern philosophy out of thin air, but I think he makes an interesting point when he cites the notion in Buddhism, when it is said that a teaching is like “a finger pointing at the moon”. The moon (enlightenment) is the essential thing and the pointing finger is trying to direct us to it, but it is important not to confuse finger with moon…the goal (‘the moon’) for Saunders’ purposes is to attain the state of mind from which we might write a story. I am wondering what the goal might be for someone teaching existentially. It seems to me alongside the ‘facts’ of existentialism and the ‘skills’ of existential therapeutic practice, there is also something about aspiring to a state of mind.

**MA:** I’ve recently been reframing some of the material from my dissertation for papers in *Existential Analysis* (see Adams 2021b in this issue). I write by cutting, editing, moving bits around and then even more cutting and moving. Although the end product may read well, it never starts off like that. In the meantime, here are some thoughts that have come out of this editing process and also what has been said so far here. In no particular order. I read a review of that book Simon and it looked interesting but not quite interesting enough to remember to get it. Maybe the review didn’t speak to me (I wonder why?). But you’ve made it so now. What I find fascinating is that what you are talking about is that a book, something that is written by a person as some sort of definitive and universal statement, can have the effect you describe. Yet we all know it can. This the difference between good writing and bad writing, perhaps between writing existentially
and writing technically, writing about existentialism. The former makes you think and feel things you haven’t though or felt before. Technical writing just tells you stuff that never gets to be any more than interesting. Someone writing existentially has found a way to connect with the audience. I use the word audience deliberately because when I write I feel I am talking, I am performing. But who to? When I write, I always have an audience in mind – three different audiences actually – they are all imagined and not real and present, so I can obviously never check with them what’s going on for them. I have to speak to all of them at the same time.

The first audience is understanding and is supportive of what I am trying to say. The second is sceptical and critical of what I am saying and therefore of my philosophical position. The third is interested and curious but not particularly knowledgeable.

The first group can be critical, but in a helpful way. I doubt I will ever convince the second group but at least if I can provide a coherent argument the individuals may go away thinking that I am on to something. The third group is open to what I am saying but I can’t make any assumptions about what they already know. I have to explain what I mean as clearly as I can in everyday language but without being simplistic.

Writers hardly ever know what effect they have. You put a message in bottle with no return address and throw it into the sea. But all writers think they have something to say and want to be read. A writer without a reader is not a writer.

The paradox is that although reading and writing are both done in private and individually, as a reader I don’t just read words on a page, I read what this particular person, the writer, has written. If it is done well, existentially, this leads me to wonder who the writer is and reflexively who I am. I can imagine the writer is talking just to me and I can use my annotations to start a conversation with the writer. A book that was once just words on a page, anonymous and communal, then becomes personal; it becomes our shared book and the words become our words. This what was happening when Simon, you were reading Saunders book, but not when you were on the film course. As a reader, I find the writer is talking to just me. As a reader, I find personal meaning in the universal, and the effect can be similar to that of psychotherapy. But this is by no means automatic, it is a consequence of writing existentially. Both the content and the process of the writing has to give the reader enough space to ask questions both of the material and of themselves. The experience will only be personal if the reader can find him or herself in it. If not, if the meaning stays as words on the page, and if the reader does not make any annotations, then the book has not been engaging enough and the reader feels talked at, or told. This is the banking method as Paulo Friere (1972) put it, and the

What Does It Mean to ‘Teach Existentially’, and How Can We Teach Existentialism Existentially?
principles can be transposed onto teaching, although the details of what is done will have to take differences in context into account. (Lots more could be said here! It’s a rabbit hole to go down). In this book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Friere describes conventional education as the ‘banking method’ because it involves an active teacher depositing knowledge into passive pupils. He says the more that students collect and catalogue knowledge, (for essays and so on, to be assessed on) the less they can be creative with it, and more importantly the less they will question the dominant narrative of the power differential between the teacher and the taught. This often continues when the student becomes a teacher and reinforces the dominant narrative in his or her practice. Our job as existential therapists, and as people who teach and write existentially, is to question this and re-awaken a sense of agency. But how? Laing made use of this idea in his relationship between *praxis* and process. Curiously, and perhaps paradoxically, what happened on your film course Simon was that even though it was in person (there’s whole lot more to say here about the ‘in person’ nature of Zoom – another rabbit hole), you still felt talked at. It was the banking method. You felt disempowered, or to put it more colloquially, bored. But also that this led you to question why and regain your agency.

*SdP:* Martin, reading your contribution above motivates me to say just a little more. First, I find the ‘banking’ metaphor useful as I think part of my evolving understanding of what it might mean to ‘teach existentially’ is that the teacher or, perhaps more properly, the facilitator, is themselves invested in the subject matter. They are not merely delivering it (I detest that term which makes it sound as though we are a link in some transactional process like delivering a parcel – the postal operative, of course, doesn’t add value to the parcel, though I guess they might reduce its value by dropping it and breaking its contents), they are animating it and offering students some sense of what is significant about it for them. In simple terms, if a teacher is just depositing knowledge, they are surely as passive as their audience. So, teaching existentially is, as I understand it, rather a scary activity as it requires the teacher to engage whole-heartedly with their students in a common endeavour.

The second thing which comes up for me is quite personal but perhaps also relevant, as it indicates the power of an existential approach. As you point out Martin, it is interesting that the (arguably) information-giving teacher provides a less personal experience than the well-written book. Now, I have been reading *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* last thing at night, perhaps not the best option as it acts upon me as a stimulant. In any case, last night I had a very lucid and detailed dream. I dreamt that I could write a short story. And in the dream I crafted a series of well-constructed sentences
which were economical and ‘true’ in a way approaching to some very small extent what I had read about Chekhov’s own approach. In the dream I felt encouraged to write – something I have often thought of but dismissed – and when I woke this sense of encouragement was still palpable in me. I relate this not because I have suddenly discovered I have some extraordinary talent…I am quite sure I have not…but because the experience of being taught existentially via the medium of the book has changed my understanding of what it means to write fiction about real life. Something small but profound has shifted for me. I am changed. This seems to me to illustrate the value of teaching existentially – that it can change us existentially.

**MA:** Yes, this is it, that if the teaching can affect us personally and not just intellectually we could say that we were taught existentially. If we just remembered some interesting things, then we were taught about existentialism. If we preference the mutative power of the personal relationship, it seems to me to be a paradox that bearing in mind that writing is done by one person on their own with no knowledge of their readers, that (some) writing can have a mutative power greater than the face-to-face (let’s not get into the effects of Zoom here) teaching relationship. A way through this could be that the banking method, although face-to-face actually undermines the personal in favour of the general, the normative.

Do you have record of the ‘well-crafted sentences’? Some of my ‘best’ thoughts happen in half-sleep at 5am (I don’t think I am alone in this) and also when riding my bike. But when I come to write them down, while the detail usually turns out to be nothing like as clear, there is usually an unexpected gem hidden inside. Such is the nature of true creativity. It cannot be planned, or predicted, or normalised. This is what we hope for when teaching existentially and what we can never get when teaching about existentialism. Given that we would all hope to be teaching existentialism existentially the next questions are: What do we do? Why do we do what we do? How do we know it works?

**RL:** I like this idea that learning is about being transformed. I think that this is what Colaizzi (1973) was driving at. I really resonate with Friere’s (1972) ideas too. If I find myself teaching and wanting the students to really ‘get it’ – that is to understand and enact what I am trying to teach them – I know that I have slipped into the ‘banking’ method. A part of me wants them to know what I know, and do it as I do it. However, if I can let go of that and enter a not-knowing space, I can accept that I do not know what they need to learn. This is fairly obvious, since I cannot really know what they already know or even how they see the world and others. All I can do is open up the dialogue and open up the possibilities.
The most scary thing is definitely opening myself up to allow myself to be changed. Carl Rogers (1978) also wrote about the difference between a banking method, being the traditional way of teaching and learning, and a more student-centred type of learning that he suggested was more effective. He found that if the teacher trusts that the students can think and learn for themselves, then a facilitative learning environment is provided where the focus is on the process of learning rather than the content. He suggested that this kind of environment promotes growth and the learning is deeper, faster and more pervasive in the life and behaviour of the student.

I remember once in class a trainee asked me for information about something I knew nothing about. They were a trainee who adhered to the banking method of learning and expected me to pour forth knowledge in a content kind of way. Had I known about the subject asked about, I might have, without realising it, fallen into the banking method and answered the question in a content-focused way. However, since I did not know, I simply shrugged and said I had never heard of the mentioned philosophy. The trainee was shocked. How could I not know? It revealed something about them, about me, about our relationship and about the process of teaching and learning and how we saw this differently.

Often, I find that what I am doing in class is helping shape the frame and moving it from a ‘banking’ expectation towards a more facilitative, experiential one. Martin, you asked what, why and how do we know it works? In answer to the ‘what’, I come to class with various pieces of readings, exercises, lectures, videos and so on (the ‘objects’ around which I organise the teaching). I come as authentically and as transparently as I can. By transparent, I mean around my process rather than about the facts of who I am. As I have got more experienced, I don’t tend to disclose things about me (age, relationship status, children), but I will disclose my attitudes and stances and most importantly, my responses to the class and to the trainees. I try to stay fluid and adjust the ‘objects’ of learning according to group preferences and so on.

In terms of the ‘why’, I do this because I believe that people will learn what they learn and at the rate they learn, and that I cannot and should not try to control this. I do this because everyone learns differently and so I need to adapt to this trainee and this group – what I did before may not work here. I do it because I know from experience over time, that when I learn myself, it involves whole emotional engagement and seeing the world, myself or others differently from how I did before. How do I know it works? I don’t. I usually get good feedback from trainees – but that doesn’t mean that they have learnt anything, they may just have been having a nice time. I think though that it may be important to explore why we want
to teach and have an impact on others, since unattended to motivations may get in the way of good teaching. Since we do not really train to teach no one asks us these questions and we do not go on a personal developmental journey in the same way that we do when we train to become therapists.

**Concluding Reflections**

This paper is the unplanned result of the combination of two events. The sequence was set up by Rosemary Lodge and Zoe Gelis’s 2018 conference presentation ‘To plan or not to plan? That is the (a priori) question’. The sequence would have stopped there had they not submitted the presentation for publication in *Existential Analysis*. The editorial process demanded some editing and clarification and it was in this process that a shared interest in the teaching process was revealed. It was not planned.

What is printed here is an edited version of the email exchange that followed and brought out a number of themes. One of these is that in general, psychotherapy teaching is extremely under-documented, under-researched and under-evaluated. That this is so is all the more surprising considering how much attention is given to maintain standards in both psychotherapy and supervision practice. There seems to be an unexamined assumption that just because a person is a knowledgeable, qualified and experienced therapist, they will be an effective teacher. Rutten & Hulme (2013), Zepf & Gerlach (2013) and Yalof (2015) have argued that such an assumption cannot be made.

As to what the nature of psychotherapy teaching may be, and in particular, what the nature of existential therapy teaching may be, a number of themes emerged. One of these is that the person who is doing the teaching is inseparable from what is taught. If the teacher’s own agency and imagination is not inspired by the material, those who are taught will not be either. When we teach existentially, we are not simply delivering information that is there to be remembered and recounted in assessed essays and dissertations. This is teaching about existentialism.

When we teach existentially, our primary interest is not to cover the syllabus, it is to inspire dialogue and reflexive examination. This may on occasions sit uneasily or even conflict with course structures and validating bodies. This is not to say that the existential teacher operates an ‘anything goes’ policy, any more than an existential therapist does (Adams 2013: 22; Deurzen & Adams 2016: 6). The work of an existential teacher is similar, but not the same, as the work of an existential therapist in that is based on the practice of phenomenology, and as phenomenology is a research method it is rigorous and systematic at the same time as being context-specific; it can be adapted for use in many different situations without losing what is essential.
A difference between teaching existentially and teaching about existentialism is that when teaching existentially, the learning will be transformative, it will make a difference to how the person sees himself or herself and how they live their lives. It will not just be interesting, it will be important. A characteristic of transformative learning is that it is always mutual. Another way of saying this is if the teacher comes out of the classroom without feeling they have been changed, the chances are that the students will not be either. This is not to say that both will changed in the same way nor that it can be programmed in. Change can never be predicted, and still less be planned. We have to prepare for it to not go the way we planned. This is both scary and exciting. As teachers we are employed to deliver the syllabus but, existentially, the syllabus, the curriculum, is not what it written down in the course handbook, it is who the people are in the room. It is the process of thinking, questioning, wondering and applying that makes the difference. As a process, it has some parallels with Moustakas Heuristic Method (Moustakas 1990; Sultan 2018).

It also has some parallels with therapy. Existential therapy training is a relational endeavour, and the relationship between trainer and trainee is key to trainee growth and learning. When teaching existentially, we use ourselves, we notice, engage with and digest what our trainees bring to the classroom in their interactions with us. We feed this back to them in various ways within the context of a supportive relationship so that they can learn about themselves and how they come across to others. We do this so that they can sit with clients in a more open and dialogical way, rather than trying to teach their clients what they already know. We model something to them about being a therapist.

When teaching (and writing) existentially we work largely in the dark, and while may wish for our work to have an impact, we cannot demand or prescribe what it will be or when it will be. All we can do is act in accordance with our beliefs, act as Kierkegaard says, with faith, in as straightforward way as we can. Yalom was aware of this and called it rippling. He says that:

Rippling refers to the fact that each of us creates – often without our conscious intent or knowledge – concentric circles of influence that may affect others for years, even for generations.

(2008: 83)

We may even get positive feedback from our students, and while this is always encouraging, it must never be the reason we do what we do.

The serendipitous conjunction of individual interests that led to this paper is, we are only too well aware, the result of the personal views of the authors. We believe however that there is something valuable in our...
conclusions, if only because the area has been so comprehensively overlooked. We have noted the lack of research into the teaching experience and would like to encourage researchers to seriously consider projects that look into the psychotherapy teaching experience either from the perspective of the teacher or the taught so that it can be better understood and so that the same professionalism can be introduced into teaching existential therapy as is applied to the work of therapy.

**Professor Simon du Plock** is Senior Research Fellow at the Metanoia Institute, London. He was Head of the Faculty of Post-Qualification and Professional Doctorates at the Institute from 2007 to 2020, in which role he directed counselling psychology and psychotherapy research doctorates jointly with Middlesex University. He has authored nearly one hundred papers and book chapters on existential therapy. 
Contact: Simon.duPlock@metanoia.ac.uk

**Dr Martin Adams** is an Existential Psychotherapist, Lecturer, Supervisor and Writer. His most recent book is *An Existential Approach to Human Development: Philosophical and therapeutic perspectives* (2018). He contributed to *Case Studies in Existential Therapy* (2018) and to the *Wiley World Handbook for Existential Therapy* (2019). He is also a sculptor. Contact: martincadams@icloud.com

**Dr Rosemary Lodge** is Assistant Professor and Research Lead on the DPsych at Regent’s University, London. Contact: lodger@regents.ac.uk

**References**


‘Schizophrenia’ in the Echo Chamber

Rachel Noar

Abstract
Drawing on the notion of ‘the echo-chamber’, this paper examines the existence of an insular bubble amongst existential psychotherapists when discussion turns to ‘schizophrenia’. Improved dialogue between existential psychotherapy and contemporary psychiatry is encouraged with consideration as to how we might retain philosophical and ethical integrity for such conversations.

Key Words
Schizophrenia, psychosis, voices, psychiatry, medication, psychotherapy, freedom

Introduction
‘Echo-chamber effect’ metaphorically describes an online phenomenon: a self-affirming, self-filtering process by which internet users are exposed to content that reinforces their social and political views. It results in online ‘virtual cliques’ (Grimes, 2017) and uncritical dialogue prone to bias. Drawing on the notion of ‘the echo chamber’ and holding up a mirror to our profession, I propose the existence of an insular bubble among existential psychotherapists when discussion turns to mental illness, specifically schizophrenia. In crude terms, it involves psychiatrists being portrayed as ‘baddies’ in relation to patient liberty, medication being dismissed or not complexly considered and phenomenological exploration of auditory hallucinations/voices being presented as the best means of aiding journeys out of supposed ‘madness’.

First, some clarifications. I do not ignore Laing (1990a, 1990b) or Szasz (2010) on the importance of engaging with patients’ agency, choice and intentionality, and dismissing Cartesian views of madness as existing ‘in’ people as diseases. Deconstructing ‘schizophrenia’ as a diagnosis has value. Reified biomedical disease labels of the DSM are socially specific ethnographic constructs (for example, see McNally, 2011; Davies, 2016). However, Winnicott’s (1992, p.ix) insight resonates: “The best way to learn” about schizophrenia is “to be involved with….a schizophrenic person” and “we may find ourselves in such a position by mistake”.

I found myself in this position when a family member – let us call him ‘Simon’ – was diagnosed with schizophrenia in his late twenties. Simon’s ‘recovery’ is a success story of personal strength, medication, psychiatric
intervention, additional support services and family care. Had I not known Simon, I might have aligned my professional stance with Laing or Szasz. However, Simon’s struggle taught me such approaches are at best naïve, at worst unethical, if applied without contextual understanding of each person’s unique situation. Had medical professionals exclusively followed an existentially informed response, I am confident Simon would have less ‘freedom’ today: either his voices would still dominate or he would have starved himself to death, following their insistent instructions not to eat.

Applying Simon’s ‘treatment plan’ indiscriminately is not the answer either. There are ‘schizophrenias’ not ‘schizophrenia’ (Pao, 1975). For those who recover without medication, or live meaningfully whilst concurrently hearing voices, a therapy-focused approach can be endorsed. However, alternative clinical possibilities are needed for clients for whom these scenarios are not possible. Failure to acknowledge this allows therapeutic practice to become blinkered.

Such openness requires an end to echo-chamber debate and new consideration as to how existential psychotherapy might marry with contemporary psychiatry. Philosophically, this necessitates holding in play two epistemological lenses traditionally opposed. The ambition is to reconcile psychiatric support with existentially informed notions of freedom, agency, embodiment and authenticity. Ultimately, the issue is how we work with, rather than against, medical-led approaches whilst retaining philosophical integrity as existential therapists.

It is paramount we consider this. Placements on mental health wards are not compulsory for UKCP or BACP accreditation, yet anyone with a history of hearing voices could walk through our practice door. Without first-hand experience of patients/clients in the throes of an acute psychotic breakdown, our professional response may rely on what we read, peer-to-peer debate and memories of training lectures. We can exist in a bubble. So, let us examine this bubble in dialogue with Simon as a case study. His treatment has been NHS led for fifteen years. He granted me permission to discuss his experiences.

An Echo Chamber?

To consider the existence of an echo chamber, we need parameters, a precinct for analysis. I suggest the Society for Existential Analysis’ professional journal, *Existential Analysis* (*EA*), which aims “To provide a forum for the expression of views and the exchange of ideas amongst those interested in existential-phenomenological analysis and its application to therapeutic practice and everyday life” (The Society for Existential Analysis, 2020). Through it, we can highlight editorial decision-making *vis-à-vis* what “a community of existential therapists” communicates.

We also require a time frame for analysis. I suggest two criteria: (a) research practicalities (the dates EA can be accessed in online searches);
and (b) case study (when Simon’s schizophrenic symptoms became acute). On both counts, this takes us to circa 2003. Accordingly, I conducted an online search through the archive of EA since 2003 with ‘schizophrenia’ as the only keyword. This search, repeated up to December 2020, generated ninety-nine articles, book reviews and letters. Some of these entries focus on ‘schizophrenia’, some mention ‘it’ in passing, and others reference ‘it’ as part of a title listed in a bibliography. An additional EA article by Stadlen (2003) was found online during a fact-checking process. My reflections on content are summarised below.

**Medication**

Antipsychotic medication is the gold standard treatment for schizophrenia within mainstream psychiatry, the justification being that drugs treat chemical imbalances ‘in’ brains (for example, regulation of dopamine) so fix ‘the disease’. This view is critiqued throughout EA on the grounds of Cartesian dualism, pathologising suffering and ignoring historical factors (familial, social and personal) that make a person’s psychosis intelligible. There is only the occasional entry about medication being beneficial. For example, in Gamsu’s (2015: 381) review of Bentall’s book *Doctoring the Mind*, she quotes him saying antipsychotics are “evidently effective for many”. However, in this review, and across EA’s archive, this kind of brief line is overwhelmed by text discussing antipsychotics’ curative failures, harmful side effects and misplaced therapeutic use. For example, Gamsu (ibid) goes on to highlight that between a quarter to a third of patients will not respond to antipsychotic medication but continue to be medicalised. She also considers “a flawed” trial for second generation antipsychotics and throws doubt on psychosis requiring medication because “six studies following patients for a year after a first psychotic breakdown” found no evidence that medicated patients fared better (ibid: 384).

Titles of other books selected for review by EA support this narrative. For example, Garfield & Macker’s (2009) *Beyond Medication: Therapeutic engagement and the recovery from psychosis*, Moncrieff’s (2007) *The Myth of the Chemical Cure* and Moncrieff’s (2013) *The Bitterest Pills: The troubling story of antipsychotic drugs*. These books importantly question the value of medication but have an anti-medication agenda that is not situated by their EA reviewers in broader research and debate. Instead, the book reviews are more akin to summaries of content or personal reflections rather than critical assessments.

For example, consider Pringle’s (2008) and Scalzo’s (2014) response to Moncrieff’s texts. Scalzo (2014: 371) compares Moncrieff’s narrative of psychiatry’s reliance on medication to a “crime novel”, repeats the plea “for all of us to ‘wake up to the real nature of antipsychotic drugs’” and questions if benefits outweigh risks for drugs that cause “metabolic impairment,
cardiac toxicity and neurological damage”. Pringle (2008), meanwhile, writes of being “won over” by Moncrieff’s thesis, referencing studies that suggest anti-psychotics are ineffective/only as successful as placebos/damaging in terms of side-effects.

When discussing the negative effects of medication, these reviewers speak of drugs in the general; for example, “Some psychoactive drugs” (Pringle, 2008: 425). This failure to differentiate between anti-psychotics matters because the drugs are not equally ineffective or damaging. See the Royal College of Psychiatrists’ webpages (2019) for drug differentiation. Off the back of its list of drugs, I hold to account book reviews that ignore a drug like Clozapine, given when other anti-psychotics fail. Gamsu’s (2015) focus on ‘six trials’ that suggest anti-psychotics do not work in the first year ignores the complexity of the situation/timing vis-à-vis primary and secondary drug choice. Not a single article in EA names Clozapine, despite it being the only approved drug for treatment-resistant schizophrenia (Bryan, 2014; Stroup, et al, 2016; The Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2019).

Psychiatrists do not prescribe a drug like Clozapine without a duty of care, as we might imagine after reading Pringle (2008) and Scalzo’s (2014) reviews of Moncrieff’s books. Outside of EA, we discover psychiatrists engaging with Clozapine as responsible professionals, using a traffic light system to monitor its side effects once prescribed (Bryan, 2014). We also readily find efforts to examine past meta-analyses of drug trials focused on Clozapine’s positive and negative performance (for example, Taylor, 2017) contra Moncrieff’s charge, as referenced in Pringle’s (2008) review, that only ‘positive’ trials are typically published.

Then there are the case studies included in EA. No one with a positive experience of psychiatric drugs is identified. Instead, there is ‘Mrs C’ who, “worn down by medication”, built esteem by working with a therapist (Westlake, 2009: 383); a four-year-old given medication too young (Pringle 2013: 371); Rosie, a driven frantic with despair and falsely labelled ‘mad’ (Esterson, 2014: 114); and Hilary Mantel (2015) who speaks negatively of being “drugged”. We need to take these case studies seriously. However, exclusive focus on negative case studies allows bias, as Simon’s story reflects.

Despite years of psychotherapy, nothing alleviated early hallucinations, paranoia, and disordered thinking that started when he was aged eighteen. A decade later, Simon’s first recognised psychotic breakdown came. Initial anti-psychotics prescribed had little impact on his voices, aka “the judges”, that encouraged him to starve. He spent hours accommodating their demands: reciting lines on all fours, begging for forgiveness and refusing to speak for fear of punishment. Then his psychiatrist said, “I have a drug, Clozapine. It will give you your life back.”

The psychiatrist’s prophecy came true. Clozapine gave Simon ‘his life back’, “freeing” him to eat, work, socialise and pursue other therapies. For
Simon, Clozapine is not the nightmare antipsychotic drug on the pages of *EA*. Rather, it is what makes the fundamental difference between living life with autonomy versus dying of starvation, or of only ever existing as ‘the judges’ slave in a masochist-sadist dynamic akin to that described by Sartre (2003). When stable on medication, Simon cannot fully remember being in this servile state. However, I know it is not a place he wishes to dwell. In the first hour of his first fully florid breakdown, ‘the judges’ evaporated from his being for a split second. In absolute raw terror, he managed to utter, “Rachel, I am in existential hell”. Then he was gone, lost to the world of ‘the judges’ who reigned supreme once more. That was until Clozapine ‘freed’ Simon to reclaim his life and stay out of the hell that is his psychosis.

**Psychiatry**

The language I use – Simon being ‘freer’ on medication – directs us to the question: is Simon’s autonomy enhanced or diminished by lifetime reliance on Clozapine? Below, I build a case in favour of the former, offering a particular interpretation of Simon’s ‘being-in-the-world’ (Heidegger, 1962) when in a psychotic state. But first, let me address the alternative, the latter perspective embedded on the pages of *EA*.

Note, I do not ignore the way in which contributors qualify their critiques of medication. I recognise Stadlen (2003: 11) claims Szasz did not reject medication outright, just when administered without patient consent. However, what if patients are too psychotic to give informed consent? Do we then deny medication? Is sectioning a patient ever justifiable?

Most language used to describe psychiatry in *EA* suggests not to give medication in such circumstances, nor to section. Consider Esterson (2014: 107) arguing that the profession relies on methods akin to “a police state”; or Sheppard (2019: 112) disputing the possibility of “good psychiatry”; or Szasz (in Stadlen, 2003) speaking of patients being “imprisoned” and comparing psychiatry with slavery. We are also told of a conclusion Szasz (ibid: 220) reached by adolescence: patients are only “incarcerated because they embarrass their families”, with psychiatric institutions serving the latter’s interests rather than that of patients.

We cannot ignore the heritage of psychiatry or the abuses of power in asylums, as captured by testimony in *Mental: A history of the madhouse* (2011). The anti-psychiatry movement from the Sixties can be contextually understood. Nonetheless, should we reject today’s psychiatric practices because historical practices were unethical? In bygone eras, doctors infected patients with malaria to cure syphilis, gave heroin for coughs and electrocuted men’s genitals to help impotency (Govenkar, 2015). Do we avoid GPs because we question medical practices of the past? No, we recognise medicine is an evolving profession; its scientific facts are historically
situated and socially constructed (Latour & Woolgar, 1986).

Perhaps this counter view is not emphasised in the archive of *EA* because abuses of power continue today. Whilst there are likely to be occasions of unethical practice in every industry, the contemporary British psychiatry I have witnessed on the sidelines of Simon’s journey tells me that indiscriminate damning language used against the profession is misplaced. Simon’s team commits to an inclusive, integrative approach. Though initially ‘locked’ in a mental hospital, placed under suicide watch and given antipsychotic medicine without the capacity for consent, he was included in dialogue about care as soon as he was present enough for such conversations. Consultant psychiatrists always responded to Simon’s interest in various therapeutic interventions: CBT, avatar therapy, personal therapy and relationship counselling. Meanwhile, they monitor side effects/blood levels religiously, ensuring he is on the minimum dose of Clozapine to keep the ‘the voices’ at a low level. And when Simon spoke of needing more purpose in life, psychiatrists facilitated his enrolment on a training programme to become a key worker.

In short, Simon’s psychiatric team has consistently nurtured his potential to take responsibility for his own life whilst supporting him in his ‘facticity’ (Heidegger, 1962) of psychosis. Similarly, his family, not embarrassed by or unwilling to engage with his voices, have responded to his needs, supporting him to become author of his own life. On this narrative, neither psychiatry nor families are the adversaries to liberty one might imagine them to be on reading much of *EA*. To argue otherwise requires a particular definition of liberty and freedom, one espoused by a libertarian such as Szasz for whom any effort to treat without consent infantalises, depriving the other of taking responsibility.

Translating these contrasting positions into the Heideggerian (1962) language of ‘solicitude’, we might ask: is there ever a case for ‘leaping in’, in the short term, to nurture the other’s capacity to take on his/her’s life’s project in the future? Or do we only believe in ‘leaping ahead’ on the basis we are all – the psychotics amongst us too – “at all times, responsible for everything we do?” (Szasz, 2005: 117).

I support the former position, believing that in moments of florid psychosis, Simon existed in a hinterland beyond that of the Dasein of *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1962); his being-in-the-world was not his, despite the voices coming from his being. That is to say, when he was at the mercy of these controlling and destructive voices, he had no capacity for choice or responsibility. So, it follows, he did not have capacity to be ‘authentic’ or ‘inauthentic’ (ibid). And if this is so, can we call it infantilising, coercive even, to ‘leap in’? Would we really be taking away freedom, dominating another? Surely, in this scenario, ‘leaping in’ can be an act of empowerment, a means to an
end: restoring another’s capacity for both authenticity and inauthenticity.

This is perhaps easier imagined by considering Simon’s relationship with ‘the judges’ through the prism of Sartre’s (2003: 276) reworking of Hegel’s Lordship-Slave dynamic. This is not to ignore criticism that his thesis reinstates metaphysical mind-body dualism (for example, see Tillich in May, 1988: 7). Rather, it is to capture the potential power of psychosis to deprive a supposed ontological condition of existence: that Man is “condemned to be free” (Sartre, 1990: 23).

Taking ontological freedom for granted, Sartre (2003) argues there may be no escape from the conflictual dynamic of relationships, but there is choice in the position one adopts to the dynamic. We can choose how we respond to the Look of the other. When it comes to psychosis, I disagree. When Simon’s existence was gripped by the voices, he could not but be the masochist. He could not but recite the words ‘the judges’ demanded. He could not but enact his mock execution. He could not but starve himself. Had he starved, it would not have been suicide – the act of intentionally causing one’s death – but something else, a non-choice, because he could not even interpret his facticity.

There is a school of thought that Sartre’s thesis – our *modus operandi* of relating to ‘the other’ is grounded in conflict and functions as a dance of appropriating ‘the other’ – speaks of ontic possibility rather than ontology of Being: that he prioritises the idiom of possession for personal reasons, ignoring the generative and transformative potential of relationships (Diprose, 2002). In other words, there is ‘Exit’ not ‘No Exit’ (Sartre, 1989) from conflictual dynamics. Analogously, we might suggest the same for and of medication: that we do away with the idiom of possession, recognising the ontology of medication is not enslavement. Enslavement is just one of its ontic possibilities. Nurturing the freedom of its recipient is another.

From this perspective, Simon’s psychiatric team consistently fought for his liberty and capacity for authenticity; contra Szasz (2008: 324-5), psychiatry is not necessarily characterised by ‘coercion’. What then is the difference between a surgeon operating on a patient who arrives at A&E unconscious following a heart attack, and a psychiatrist sectioning/prescribing medication for an acutely psychotic patient who will likely seriously harm himself in the immediate future? Neither patient can speak ‘for themselves’, so to speak. Moreover, in both scenarios, there could be underlying embodied distress that therapy could help once the acute crisis has passed. Perhaps the heart attack victim turned to bad eating and drinking habits through grief. Perhaps the schizophrenic patient internalised a sense of alienation and familial dislocation. Yet we do not expect A&E doctors to turn away unconscious ‘physically’ ill patients who cannot consent and just prescribe therapy. So why argue that psychiatrists should do so for psychotic ones? This would
implicitly reintroduce a Cartesian mind-body split that the philosophy of embodiment problematises (for example, see Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Accordingly, I support the select paragraphs in *EA* that allow for ethical psychiatric interventions without patient consent. For example, Richards (2014: 75) imagines a “provision of services” that involves “deprivation of liberty” but “founded on dignity and respect”; and Burston (2004: 226) argues in favour of ethical intervention, breaking client confidentiality if a young anorexic intends to starve since “her horizons of possibility have been constricted... by misguided beliefs”. From Burston’s perspective, it is crude to pit patients in an “adversarial struggle” with families and lacking of “realism, generosity and common sense” to suggest that “the same ethical principle – right to suicide or absolute confidentiality – applies equally to all people”.

In *EA* we find praise for Szasz’s commitment to an egalitarian stance with patients and efforts not to predetermine therapy (Cohn in Stadlen, 2003). We also learn how Szasz distanced himself from Laing for unintentionally establishing another ‘asylum’ in the form of Kingsley Hall: it had its own ‘rules’ involving ‘forced incarceration’ and LSD pharmaceuticals (Sigal in ibid; Heaton, 2006). However, surely power is necessarily at play in all therapeutic relationships, including those of Szasz. There is not just coercive disciplinary institutional power typified by the asylum; there is discursive power too (Foucault 1980, 1995, 2002). Discursive power, as Foucault describes, is relationally pervasive; how we think, behave and modify ourselves is a relational response to the looks, words, beliefs and expectations of others.

This is not to suggest Szasz and other authors in *EA* who support his viewpoint actively deny that discursive power functions in their therapeutic relationships. Rather it is to bring to light this quality in these relationships to broaden the debate. Therapists may not impose forceful coercive power in the form of lobotomies, electro shock therapy or forced medication, but they still influence (vulnerable) patients/clients. For example, Simon independently took himself off prescribed medication after a well-meaning locum GP encouraged him to reflect on his relationship with antipsychotics in a review consultation. Within forty-eight hours ‘the judges’ were making their return; by the end of the week, Simon was starving himself once more. It took him three years to recover from that breakdown, owing to the impact of suddenly stopping Clozapine.

My argument is not to stop questioning whether medication is necessary. We need to hold psychiatric decisions to account. Rather, it is a call for existential therapists to be honest about our power when we criticise others’ abuses of power. It is a plea to recognise how our language about medication might be heard, and to acknowledge the potential risk of unintentional harm despite best efforts to give clients autonomy.
Therapy

Referencing the archive of *EA*, we might respond, “Yes, but…”, pointing to relative merits of therapy over medication (for example, see Heaton (2006); Sheppard (2007); Esterson (2014); Lawson (2016); Oakley (2015); Keller (2008); Shields (2014); Mantel (2015)). Broadly speaking, these contributors communicate:

(i) ‘Mental illness’ does not exist as an irrational bodily thing with a deterministic cause. The medical profession pathologises embodied distress into disease entities. When such distress is explored, in the context of family dynamics or wider life experience, ‘madness’ reveals itself as intelligible responses to being-with-others (Heidegger, 1962), ontological insecurity, low self-esteem or what is perceived as the ‘unspeakable’. Ultimately, schizophrenia is viewed as “a special strategy a person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation” (Laing in Sheppard, 2007: 308).

(ii) All communication, even that which is psychotic, is necessarily hermeneutic and intentional. A phenomenological interpretive dialogue with clients who hear voices is possible. Rather than silence the voices, we ought to explore their meaning and normalise their communication.

To draw out these themes is not to suggest uniformity amongst authors. Nor is it to ignore differences between Laing and Szasz (see Stadlen, 2003, 2014 and Burston 2004, 2009) or Szasz’ (2005, 2008) own critiques of Laing’s personal and professional ethics. I also acknowledge Esterson’s (2014: 114) caution against generalising the case for social intelligibility: “I am not claiming all behaviour deemed mad is rational or a socially intelligible response to how others are acting towards one.” However, this idea is swamped by text in *EA* supporting the ‘psychosis is intelligible’ perspective.

Authors supporting this thesis are not interested in causation *vis-à-vis* the etiology of ‘schizophrenia’ (for example, is there genetic predisposition?). Focus is on contextually understanding patients’ relational lived experience to situate psychosis as intelligible. However, their language can end up in the realm of ‘cause and effect’ when discussion turns to treatment options; that is, if patients leave family set-ups, have therapy or move into communities focused on empowerment/feeling heard, then something can relationally shift and ‘symptoms’ lessen.

The results-oriented ‘Open Dialogue’ approach to schizophrenia, originating in West Lapland, Finland, typifies this approach. Discussed by Lawson (2016) in *EA*, it is presented as the therapeutic realisation of Laing’s thesis on psychosis: responding to failed communication in family settings is key. As such, therapists who practise Open Dialogue do not advocate antipsychotic
medication. Instead, they arrive in family settings within twenty-four hours of psychotic breakdowns and initiate an intensive programme with family members. Focus is on encouraging improved dialogue and mutual understanding. Results seem impressive: an eighty-five percent reduction rate in schizophrenia, a significant reduction in the amount of medication used and a decrease in hospitalisations (Lawson, 2016: 349).

However, there is criticism of Open Dialogue’s small sample size, research methodology and bias in its reporting (Freeman, 2019). There is also the question of how such a labour-intensive approach could be implemented in large cities. Even if we leave aside these matters and accept the data, do the results of Open Dialogue suggest that we do away with anti-psychotics for everyone? What about the fifteen percent for whom Open Dialogue did not work?

I doubt Open Dialogue could have worked for Simon. Without medication, ‘the judges’ were so powerful he would have starved before ‘open dialogue’ could be effective. Moreover, I witnessed Simon’s fragility in family therapy settings once medication enabled him to be present; he could not find his voice, despite openness to hear him. He has since found it, but this required holistic and psychiatric effort over ten years. I also question if a family focus would have been enough for him, if attending to ‘failed communication’ is key. It is not that I ignore family dynamics; there was “family stuff” there. Rather, I avoid reductionism, recognising other potentially destructive relational dynamics when growing up. I am reminded of Stack-Sullivan’s (1974) emphasis on successful adolescent relationships functioning as a mitigating factor against developing schizophrenia.

Can we be certain Simon’s voices were not irrational ramblings grounded in chemical imbalances? Perhaps they were, perhaps not. There is no test to prove it either way. However, even if he/we can read social intelligibility in his voices, does this rule out the possibility that his internalisation of trauma, anxiety or stress was accompanied by physiological changes responsive to anti-psychotics?

If we maintain openness about the processing of ‘embodied existential distress’ (Shields, 2014) then we recognise that, for clients like Simon, medication does best serve, regardless of the degree to which his voices are socially intelligible. This is not an argument about using medication for the type of ‘organic psychosis’ associated with neurological conditions that Szasz (in Stadlen, 2014: 339) contemplates as possibly existing alongside everyday socially intelligible psychosis. My point is, for people like Simon, such everyday psychosis is best served by medication – whatever the situation is vis-a-vis social intelligibility – simply because personal, familial and social distress is necessarily embodied, and hence relationally exists in tandem with physiological changes.
I acknowledge Stadlen (2003: 225), quoting Cohn, and in a broader defence of Szasz, similarly notes, “one cannot rule out the effectiveness of a physical remedy in the case of a psychological disturbance”. However, on my reading, our positions diverge in what foregrounds our ethics, and my own emphasis on context. Let me explain.

As an existential therapist I believe we relationally engage with the world as embodied ‘natural’ selves (Merleau-Ponty in Cox, 2009) and that supporting anti-psychotics in certain contexts for certain clients, does not necessarily mean favouring positivist arguments regarding biological causality. Rather, it is a nod to our embodied being, and the belief that an agnostic position vis-à-vis the cause of psychosis allows openness vis-à-vis the most appropriate treatment plan. Nietzsche’s (1998) ‘error of imaginary causes’ is pertinent here, as is Merleau-Ponty’s exploration of ‘ambiguity’ as a condition of existence (see Sapontzis, 1978). Both address the impossibility of knowing anything with certainty. From this perspective, flexibility in our approach to schizophrenia is needed, rather than a one-fits-all-approach that posits either medication or phenomenological therapy as starting points.

Such thinking is hard to find in EA, notwithstanding Uhlin’s (2003: 389-90) contribution. He supports an “existential-medical model” for schizophrenia that recognises the “entire human situation” rather than just a phenomenological interpretation or medical diagnosis alone; neither is complete without the other. In refusing to ‘take sides’, Uhlin acknowledges he risks “alienating everyone” from his point of view. Crucially, “there are certain cases of disorganisation of thought which are simply unbearable for some people, and no amount of self-acceptance or therapeutic insight will change this”. He continues, since antipsychotic medication can alleviate distress: “I can imagine that a purely existential interpretation that ignores these realities must seem to be itself dehumanising and naïve philosophical reduction of a person’s lived experience” (ibid).

With Simon testament to this, I suggest ambiguities regarding schizophrenia do not call for dismissal of medication in favour of an existentially informed therapy, or vice versa. Rather, we need an Aristotelian kind of practical ethics founded on context and ‘practical wisdom’, or professional judgement:

...both fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity...may be felt both too much and too little...but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best.

(Aristotle, 2001 [c.350 BC]: 1106b 17-23)

Following Aristotle, medication or existential therapy can become ‘too much’ or ‘too little’ our focus. What is ‘both intermediate and best’ is
sensing when to use them at the ‘right times’ and ‘towards the right people’. The scope of this paper does not permit exploration of what this ethics might look like in practice: how we commit to a particular treatment plan in a particular context. But, as a starting point, I say a situated ethics that prioritizes personal needs of patients/clients puts an onus on psychiatrists and therapists to engage in dialogue, and to educate themselves on the full range of clinical and therapeutic responses, as well as the subtleties of each antipsychotic’s efficacy. This requires an end to echo-chamber thinking.

Conclusion

What to conclude? Perhaps, you think I state the obvious: of course someone with severe psychosis needs more than existential psychotherapy. Or perhaps you find my words controversial. To those who identify with the former, I say, “Speak louder. It matters what we write in the public domain”. To those who identify with the latter, I ask you to consider ‘sedimented’ ideas (Spinelli, 2007) that penetrate our profession. If we expect clients to reflect on sedimented ideas, surely, we can too? To anyone who dismisses my thesis, I respond:

(1) If I stimulate critique, so be it. A new debate has started without echo-chamber reverberations. For the sake of clients, and ethical practice, let us explore together how we might retain philosophical integrity whilst constructing a workable bridge with psychiatry.

(2) If a client hearing voices arrives at your door, remember Simon. Recognize the power of your words during phenomenological exploration, especially when focus turns to medication.

(3) When reflecting on your professional ethics towards clients hearing voices, consider whether you have first-hand experience of seeing clients in a crisis state of an acute, dangerous and powerful psychotic breakdown – and whether further CPD in this field might contribute to the debate.

I end this paper with hope. Despite evidence of echo-chamber debate in EA, it was heartening to find Uhlin’s (2003) call for an ‘existential-medical model’ and Milton & Gillies’ (2007) support of ‘holistic’ rather than ‘ghetto’ thinking. I add my voice to theirs. I also acknowledge the small number of kindred voices that exist outside my research parameters (articles published in EA since 2003 containing the word ‘schizophrenia’). For example, Hetherington (2003: 380) critiques Szasz and Stadlen for their apparent “wish to close things down (in favour of a chosen ideology)”. For him, “the idea that conclusions have already been drawn is a worrying one” (ibid: 382). We are reminded that “openness is central to existential discourse and therapy” (ibid).
Rachel Noar is an Existential Psychotherapist and runs a private practice. Contact: rachel@rachelnoar.com

References


Hyphantis, T. N. (2003). From the asylum to the community: A way in which we are not any longer and in which we are not yet. On psychiatric rehabilitation in Greece. Existential Analysis: Journal of the Society for Existential Analysis. 14 (2): 334-344.


Company.


Stadlen, A. (2015). ‘The simple words the people speak’: On Hilary Mantel’s introduction to a 2014 seminar on ‘Maya Abbott and the Abbotts’ in

Existential Analysis: Journal of the Society for Existential Analysis


Working with Power in Existential Therapy

Paul Overend

Abstract
Drawing on a typology of different ways in which power is exercised, this article makes the argument that given the distinctive understanding of the human subject as an interrelated person in existential therapy, there follows a distinctive understanding of how power can be conceived and positively exercised in the therapy relationship.

Key Words
Power, existential therapy, interrelated personhood, subjectivity

Power is a key area of concern in therapy, and all therapists will be aware of the inherent power differential in a therapy relationship. Yet considerations of discourses of power can work with an assumption that power is a reified entity, a ‘commodity’, which some parties have, such as the state or those in authority, and which others lack. Foucault rightly challenges this reified idea of power. According to him:

*power in the substantive sense, le pouvoir, does not exist.*
(1980: 199)

*power as such, does not exist.*
(1982: 786)

*something called Power, with or without a capital letter, which is assumed to exist universally in a concentrated or diffused form, does not exist. Power exists only when it is put into action.*
(1982: 788)

For Foucault, the important question is, “How is power exercised?” (1982: 786); that is, strategically by what means and to what ends? For a consideration of power in therapy, his question is a valuable starting point, for there are many ways in which personal, interpersonal and structural power is exercised, whether creatively or destructively. Is there then a distinctive understanding of how power can be used in existential therapy that might inform the therapist’s role in the therapy relationship?

Mapping Power
Proctor (2017: ch.2) surveys some of the literature regarding power and
the therapy relationship, identifying three areas of concern:

1. **Role power**: The inherent imbalance between therapist and client, given the authority of the therapist (the role being publicly sanctioned and the therapist having expertise).
2. **Societal power**: Structural positions in society by virtue of gender, age, ethnicity, culture, education, wealth and so on.
3. **Historical power**: Personal histories and experiences of client and therapist.

Proctor explores these (ibid: Ch.3) using a fourfold taxonomy\(^1\) of how power is exercised:

A. **Power-over**: Force, coercion, domination, control which can be individual (for example, addictions), inter-personal (bullying) or structural (racism, elitism, oligarchy)
B. **Power-to**: Productive, empowered agency, generative potential, capability
C. **Power-with**: Mutual support, collaboration, solidarity, a working together that is greater than the sum of the parts, collective empowerment
D. **Power-within**: Self-worth, confidence, inner strength, resilience, moral courage, imminent spiritual resources, imaginative capacity

From this analysis, Proctor is able to consider various modalities of therapy, showing that different power relationships can be seen between therapist and client in the different therapy traditions. With the fourfold taxonomy of power, she also critiques the assumption that the power in all therapy relationships and modalities is unidirectional and inherently abusive power-over.

Person-centred therapy, for instance, highlights the power differential between client and therapist and seeks to address and minimise this. Rogers explains:

*The politics of the person-centred approach is a conscious renunciation and avoidance by the therapist of all control, or decision making, for the client. It is the facilitation of self-ownership by the client and the strategies by which this can be achieved: the placing of the locus of decision-making and responsibility for the effects of these decisions. It is politically centred on the client.*

(1978:14)

This perspective should be understood in relation to Rogers’ view of the human person, which holds that a natural actualising tendency in the client
Rogers challenges the inequality of the therapist’s ‘role power’, lest the client’s natural tendency to growth is inhibited by the therapist’s professional expertise and associated ‘societal power’ (of status, learning and so on). Although there are already implicit forms of power-over in the relationship, particular therapeutic techniques, such as reflecting back the client’s/person’s explanations in their own linguistic terms, are ways of minimising the therapist’s power-over and avoiding its explicit use. For the client’s power-within to produce growth, the therapist needs only to provide the three core conditions of the six necessary and sufficient conditions that facilitate growth. So, for instance, Rogers says of unconditional positive regard:

*It is a powerful factor, but it is in no way manipulative or controlling in the relationship. There is no judgement or evaluation involved. Power over her own life is left completely in the hands of the client. It provides a nurturant atmosphere but not a forcing one.*

(1978: 11)

Rogers’ understanding of the human subject as having a natural potential to growth, understood here as the client’s power-within, along with a concern for the therapist’s ‘role power’, results in the prescribed egalitarian relationship and non-directive practice of therapy, nurturing the client’s own power-within to become power-to for autonomy and self-realisation.

Rogers’ intention can be contrasted with the unequal power relationship between client/patient and psychiatrist in medical models of psychiatric care, in which psychiatrists have been understood to have expertise and so have been accorded the power to diagnose, prescribe drugs and even detain (Szasz, 1972). The purpose of this use of power-to is not for the benefit of the person’s autonomy but for their ‘health’ or ‘normality’, or for some safety concern. In cognitive behaviour therapy too, according to Proctor, there is a unequal ‘collaboration’ between the compliant client and the beneficent expert therapist, in which the therapist’s power can be used as power-to ‘adjust’ what is deemed to be malnormative thinking (see 2017: Ch. 5). Both modalities involve the use of power-over, so diminishing power-within.

However, the concept of power-within in not always positive either. Psychoanalysis works with a theory of the person which involves unconscious
drives and instincts, but this inner libidinal energy – which can be conceived of as a form of power-within – is not necessarily understood to be positive or life-giving in that modality, for it can limit freedom and autonomy. Power-within therefore might well be evaluated by its positive expression as power-to, which returns us not only to Foucault’s question of how power is exercised, but also to the question of power-to what end?

What then are the implications of an existential understanding of the person for the use of power in the existential therapy relationship? To answer this, an existential ontology of personhood should first be outlined.

**An Existential Understanding of Personhood**

Spinelli (2001: 41-42) observes that “nothing meaningful can be stated or experienced about ‘self’ without an implicit reliance upon the self’s interrelational placement in the world”. For existentialism, it is neither simply the case that “existence precedes essence” (Sartre, 1984: 28) for an isolated unitary subject, nor that this independent subject is merely ontically ‘with’ (that is, ‘alongside’, ‘adjacent to’ or ‘in everyday dealings with’) other independent subjects. Rather, it means that ontologically the ‘person’ is being-in-relation (an interrelational being) and being-in-process (a temporal being) until death. These relationships constitute the person and one’s lived-history (Geschichte) and so affect (that is, condition, without determining) how one lives. This interrelatedness is disclosed in:

- our everyday dealings (Umgang) with our living environment (Umwelt): Heidegger’s ‘hammer’ (2008: 98f); Marcel’s ‘the peasant’s soil’ (1950: 116);
- inter-personal relationships: Heidegger’s Mit-dasein (2008) 8; Marcel’s intersubjectivity (1950) 9;
- social assumptions and values: Nietzsche’s ‘the herd’; Kierkegaard’s ‘the crowd’ and ‘the public’ perspective; Heidegger’s ‘the “they”’ (das Man) (2008); José Ortega y Gasset’s ‘the masses’/‘mass-man’ (1932);
- social roles: revealed in the ‘bad faith’ (mauvaise foi) of Sartre’s café waiter (2018: 102-104) and of Beauvoir’s ‘Woman in Love’ (2011);
- interrelational expectations and needs: Sartre’s le regard, the Other constituting one’s self-awareness in ‘shame or pride’ (2018: 357); Lévinas’ le visage d’Autrui, the face of the Other constituting subjectivity as responsibility (1969) and in subjection to be point of being a ‘hostage’ to the Other (1998: 217-218);
- physical relationship: Sartre’s ‘caress’ (2018); Merleau-Ponty’s ‘handshake’ (1968: 142) as intercorporeity.
- discourse and communication: Heidegger on communication 13; Nietzsche on language; and Foucault on discursive practice as forms of subjection (governmentality and technologies of the self).
Both Deurzen (1997: 240)\textsuperscript{16} and Spinelli\textsuperscript{17} point to the importance of this interrelational understanding for existential therapy. The interrelational world is a constitutive of us all, therapist and client included. It is an inescapable reality of our being, the reality into which we are thrown, and something to be accounted for and considered. This emphasis distinguishes existential therapy from other therapy modalities.

In addition to these ontological characteristics of interrelatedness, there are many structural aspects to consider too, such as economic context and ideology (for example, Karl Marx and Louis Althusser),\textsuperscript{18} which contribute to the social construction of subjectivity and self-identity. Philosophers exploring structural power and the social construction of subjectivity are often distinguished from existentialism by being classified as ‘post-modernists’ or ‘post-structuralists’, but many of their themes, concerns and methods have origins in the concerns of language, discourse and communication of Nietzsche and Heidegger. These political dimensions are forms of ‘societal power’ operative in part of the ‘life-world’, and so are also taken into consideration in existential therapy, by Deurzen\textsuperscript{19} in particular, as well as in narrative therapy.\textsuperscript{20}

### An Understanding of Power for Existential Therapy

Neither Deurzen nor Spinelli specifically explicate this insight of interrelational personhood in relation to power. Yet all of the examples above involve the use of power. Even Heidegger’s ‘hammer’ demonstrates how everyday entities appropriated as ‘equipment’ extend Dasein’s own power ‘in-order-to’ (\textit{das Um-zu}) achieve some end. Generally though, other-power is viewed to be restrictive in existentialism. For instance, Heidegger views Dasein’s relation to ‘Others’ as one of subjection in which Dasein ‘is not’: “One belongs to the Others oneself and enhances their power”.\textsuperscript{21}

And for Sartre, interpersonal relationships are in conflict with freedom, an experience of ‘power-over’ pressing upon one’s conscience, hence ‘Hell is other people’ (from \textit{Huis Clos}, 1949).

Existential therapy shares Rogers’ concern over the ‘role power’ of the therapist (as other-power). This may well motivate Spinelli’s recommendation of holding back on theory (the therapist’s expertise) and of bracketing the therapist’s assumptions to both admit to and enable an ‘un-knowing’ approach towards their client’s experience (1997; 2005: 151), and Deurzen’s commending of ‘cultivating a naïve and open attitude’ (2014: 167). These are all ways to avoid overpowering the client, but of staying with their perception and interpretation as they disclose and explore their experience. However, existential therapy challenges the model of the human subject in person-centred therapy. For existential therapy, there is no essential self (as there is for Maslow and Rogers) and person-centred therapy can be regarded as paying insufficient attention to how power outside the therapy room has
already been formative of the client’s existence (that is, historical power), and continues to inform their self understanding and choices.

For better or worse, as a socially-constituted and interrelated being, one is already formed by power which is operative in roles and relationships (for example, in family, education and at work) and in positive and negative experiences (for example, of praise and achievement or of being bullied and abused) and in social, cultural and religious discourses and practices. As a being-in-relation, one has a ‘self’ understanding, a ‘self’ regulation (a ‘call of conscience’) and a comportment in the world that is already formed by others. Even one’s present hermeneutic perspectives (from which to interpret the lived-experience) and future horizon are already shaped by the dynamics of power, so that even one’s imagined choices (one’s power-within) are the choices of an other-constituted interrelated subject. A client may therefore need assistance in interpreting, exploring and understanding their experience, and in examining their assumptions, vicious circles and areas of self-deception, in order to discern possibilities and make choices.

**Power in the Work of Existential Therapy**

In existential therapy, the quality of the relationship between client and therapist is considered to be of key importance (the ‘we-focused’ realm, (Spinelli (2005): 148-149)). The existential therapist is not a blank screen but aims to form a real dialogical relationship. The therapist will seek to be mindful that both they and the client have been constituted as subjects by other relationships, roles and expectations in which ‘role power’, ‘societal power’ and ‘historical power’ have been operative and which affect this therapy relationship. Also, they will understand that the therapy relationship takes place in a wider social context, involving, for example, funding (whether within an employer-assisted programme, a public service or privately) which also involves power and may well inform both parties’ pre-judgments with which they individually come to the therapy relationship. The therapist is not in denial of the existence of power but will seek to be understanding of power in order to make it as transparent as possible to facilitate the quality of the relationship. The therapy relationship can itself provide fruitful material for the work of therapy (from the ‘here-and-now’ (Yalom, (2001)), as when a client’s sense of self, already formed by power having been exercised in other relationships, is disclosed in the therapy relationship. Informed by their understanding and experience of power, the therapist will be seeking to understand each particular client and how power affects their real inter-personal exchanges together, including the dynamics of any ‘games’ being played (Bern, 2016). Their insight will inform how they relate to the client (for example, whether their paraphrasing could be understood as being directive or whether the client...
is seeking to displace responsibility to the therapist).

The aim of the relationship, though, is to support the client. In Spinelli’s words:

*If there is an ultimate aim to existential psychotherapy, it is to offer the means for persons to examine, confront, clarify and reassess their understanding of life, the problems encountered throughout their life, and the limits imposed upon the possibilities inherent in being-in-the-world.*

(2005: 145)

Existential therapy begins from a phenomenology of the client’s everyday experiences, including the experience of power in various relationships, and works with the client’s struggle to make sense of their lives and to ‘own’ what is given (*eigentlich*) by a process of choosing the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of the client’s own being-there.\(^{22}\) This struggle is disclosed in emotional experiences and moods such as fear, guilt, dread, desire, anxiety and so on, as well as in the relational interactions of the client with those in the client’s world, including the therapist. The work of therapy can be conceived as a shared task of discovery or ‘un-concealment’ (Heidegger’s ἀλήθεια, 2008: 56-57, fn.1), a discernment of the ‘truth’ of the client’s lived-world and historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*). The relationship is therefore one of active engagement with the client to this end. In Spinelli’s words:

*The role of the therapist is not only that of an engaged listener but also of ‘attendant’ (the original meaning of therapist) in that he or she is also involved in the explication and reconstruction of the client’s narrative via various forms of clarificatory and challenging input.*

(1997: Prologue)

Such clarification and challenge can be given to help the client to identify ‘role power’, ‘societal-power’ and ‘historical power’ (in roles and relationships, cultural expectations, formative events and existing power dynamics). By exploring these together, the therapist can help the client to develop their hermeneutic perspective by which to interpret both their lived-experience and the pre-predicative understanding-as of existential moods (fear and love, anxiety and wonder), in order to make sense of their lives and to consider the choices available to them. The client’s agency may be limited, recognising that ‘freedom’ and ‘autonomy’ may need to be contextually negotiated and compromised, though the work of therapy may well include identifying strategies of resistance and resilience as ways of coping (for example, mindfulness, art or exercise), as well as challenging and changing...
situations. This is a gradual process of empowering the client to ‘own’ their own life, helping them to revalue their life-project and to develop personal meaning and purpose (logotherapy, Frankl, (1964)).

The work of therapy, in a well-working therapy relationship, can therefore be imagined as a form of power-with, in that it is a facilitative collaboration to enable the client to come to deeper understanding, to develop self worth and inner strength, and to imagine new possibilities (facilitating the client’s power-within), so informing and empowering their agency (power-to).

Conclusion

The existential therapist, then, can draw on an existential understanding of the interrelated person already formed outside of the therapy room by relationships, power dynamics and inequalities (in role power, structural power, historical power) in order to understand what is happening within the therapy relationship. Existential therapy should therefore not aim for the impossible avoidance of power, but seek to be understanding of power and to generate a power-with relationship in which the therapist and client are collaborating to help the client to make sense of their life, to develop self-confidence and to imagine options (power-within), with a view to empowering their agency (power-to).

Dr Paul Overend is a student at the Existential Academy and NSPC. As a priest and educator, with a Doctorate in Philosophy (on Emmanuel Lévinas’ phenomenology), he has taught philosophy and theology in universities and in HE-accredited theological education and ministerial formation training courses, and worked in pastoral and parochial appointments. He is currently exploring a career change.

Contact: dr.p.overend@icloud.com

Endnotes

1. This taxonomy is developed in feminist and other social action literature, from which I expand Proctor’s explanations. See Jo Rowlands (1997: 13); Lisa VeneKlasen & Valerie Miller (2002a, 2002b); and Starhawk (2011: Ch. 4). Starhawk identifies power-with as ‘collective power’, to be distinguished from ‘social power’, which can be an unearned (for example, privilege).

2. Maslow (1970: 95) writes, “Self-actualization …[is] the making real or actual of what the person already is, though in a potential form. The search for identity means very much the same thing, as does’becoming what one truly is’. As does also becoming ‘fully-functioning’, or ‘fully-human’, or individuated, or authentically oneself.”

3. Or for Heidegger, “the essence of Dasein lies in its existence”. (2008: 67); “Dasein’s ‘Essence’ is grounded in its existence. If the ‘I’ is an Essential
characteristic of Dasein, then it is one which must be Interpreted existentially” (2008: 152); “The essence of Dasein as an entity is its existence” (2008: 345).

   “Constituting’ does not mean producing in the sense of making and fabricating; it means letting the entity be seen in its objectivity.”

5. Heidegger uses Geschichte/geschichtlich for the historical nature of being, to be distinguished from Historie/historisch. He explains that “by ‘history’ (Geschichte), we have in view that which is past, but which nevertheless is still having effects…[on the present]…in the context of a becoming” (2008: 430, cf. p.30 fn.1). See Blattner, W. ‘Some Terminology in Being and Time’.https://faculty.georgetown.edu/blattnew/heid/terms.htm. [Accessed February 2021.]

6. Heidegger (2008: Section I.3) uses the example of a hammer as ready-to-hand (Zuhandenheit) equipment. Its unobtrusive use demonstrates Dasein’s involvement in, ‘the world-hood of the world as such…Ontologically, ‘world’ is not a way of characterising those entities which Dasein is not; it is rather characteristic of Dasein” (2008: 92). Or again, Heidegger gives the example of spectacles and telephone which extend “Dasein’s specialisation in its bodily nature”, transforming one’s relationship with distance in the world that we see or hear (2008: 141).

7. Gabriel Marcel (1950: 116) says, “We have thus progressed…towards a concept of real participation which can no longer be translated into the language of outer objects. It is perfectly clear that the soil to which the peasant is so passionately attached is not something about which he can really speak. We can say that the peasant’s soil transcends everything that he sees around him, that it is linked to his inner being, and by that we must understand not only to his acts but to his sufferings.”

8. Heidegger (2008:155) says, “The world of Dasein is a with-world [Mitwelt]. Being-in is Being-with Others. Their Being-in-themselves within-the-world is Dasein-with [Mit-dasein]”; “Being with Others belongs to the Being of Dasein, which is an issue for Dasein in its very Being. Thus as Being-with, Dasein ‘is’ essentially for the sake of others” (ibid: 160). For Sartre (2007: 104, Ch. 2. V), “Without the world there is no selfness, no person; without selfness, without the person, there is no world.”

9. Marcel (1950: 182-183) says, “[I]ntersubjectivity plays its part also within the life of the subject, even at moments when the latter’s only intercourse is with itself. In its own intrinsic structure subjectivity is already, and in the most profound sense, genuinely intersubjective…” He earlier explains how this is facilitated by ‘availability’ (disponibilité) (ibid: 163).

10. Jean-Paul Sartre (2018: 308), says “[I]nherently, shame is recognition. I recognise that I am as the other sees me…Thus the Other has not only shown me what I was; he has constituted me in a new type of being, obliging me to support new qualifications. This being was not in me as a potentially before Other appeared”; “I need the Other in order to fully grasp all the
Existential Analysis: Journal of The Society for Existential Analysis

structures of my being; my for-itself refers to my for-the-Other” (ibid: 309).

11. Sartre (2018: 514) says, “Out of my caress the other is born as flesh – for
me and for herself”; “And indeed the caress reveals the Other’s flesh as
flesh to me and to the Other…The point of the caress is to give rise, through
the pleasure it occasions, to the Other’s body…Thus the revelation of the
Other’s flesh takes place though my own flesh; in my desire and in the
caress that expresses is, I incarnate myself in order to actualise the Other’s
incarnation, and my cares in actualising the Other’s incarnation discloses my
own incarnation to me” (ibid: 516).

12. Merleau-Ponty (1968: 142), says “The handshake…is reversible, I can
feel myself touched as well and at the same time as touching.” Earlier,
in Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty established bodily
subjectivity as constituted by intersubjectivity: “True reflection presents
me to myself not as idle and inaccessible subjectivity, but as identical with
my presence in the world and to others, as I am now realising it: I am all
that I see, I am an intersubjective field, not despite my body and historical
situation, but, on the contrary, by being this body and this situation, and
through them, all the rest” (2002:525).

shared…”; “Dis-course too must have essentially a kind of Being which is
specifically worldly…As an existential state in which Dasein is disclosed,
discourse is constitutive of Dasein’s being” (ibid: 204).

14. For Nietzsche (1997: 42), the self is an illusion of language: “The ‘internal
world’ is full of optical illusions and mirages: the will is one of them…And
as for the ‘I’! That has become a fable, a fiction, a play on words: it has
completely and utterly ceased to think, to feel, and to will!”

15. For Foucault (1982: 781), there are “two meanings of the word subject: subject
to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by
a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power
which subjugates and makes subject to”. It is through discourses (including
psychoanalysis as a discourse of self-knowledge) and disciplinary practices
that subjects are involved in their own “subjectification” (assujettissement).

16. Deurzen (1997: 95) explains interrelationality beautifully: “We are never but
an aspect, an element, a part of a wider context. We are one of the channels
through which life flows. We are vessels through which life manifests. As
such we are always in relation, always in context, always connected to what
is around us, always defined by what we associate with. Relationship is
essential to our very survival and inspires everything we are and do.”

17. Spinelli (2001:16) says, “Viewed from an existential standpoint, questions
of choice, freedom and responsibility cannot be isolated or contained
within some separate being (such as ‘self’ or ‘other’). In the inescapable
interrelationship that exists between ‘a being’ and ‘the world’, each impacts
upon and implicates the other, each is defined through the other and,
indeed, each ‘is’ through the existence of the other. Viewed in this way, no choice can be mine or yours alone, no experienced impact of choice can be separated in terms of ‘my responsibility’ versus ‘your responsibility’, no sense of personal freedom can truly avoid its interpersonal dimensions.”

18. According to Marx (1976), “The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life-process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary it is their social being that determines their consciousness.” For Althusser (1970), “All ideology has the function (which defines it) of ‘constructing’ concrete individuals as subjects’ and ‘Ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects.”

19. These ‘post-modern’ considerations are considered as a part of the social (Mitwelt) and spiritual (Überwelt, ‘over-world’) in Deurzen (1997):123-128; Deurzen & Arnold-Baker (2005).

20. For Narrative Therapy, see Michael White and David Epston (White & Epston, 1990).

21. For Heidegger (2008:164), “Dasein, as everyday Being-with-one-another, stands in subjection to Others [in der Botmäßigkeit der Anderen]. It itself is not; its Being has been taken away by the Others. [Nicht es selbst ist, die Anderen haben ihm das Sein abgenommen.] Dasein’s everyday possibilities of Being are for Others to dispose of as they please. One belongs to the Others oneself and enhances their power. ‘The Others’ whom one thus designates in order to cover up the fact of one’s belonging to them essentially oneself, are those who proximally and for the most part ‘are there’ in everyday Being-with-one-another. The ‘who’ is not this one, not that one, not oneself, not some people, and not the sum of them all. The ‘who’ is the neuter, the ‘they’ [das Man].”

22. Heidegger uses ‘eigentlich’ rather that ‘authentisch’, the latter being closer to ‘authentic’ in ordinary English use. Eigentlich differs from Maslow’s use of authenticity (see footnote 15 above). In line with Heidegger, Deurzen (2014: 163) says, “The word ‘authenticity’ is often used to indicate the goal of becoming true to oneself and therefore more real. This is a much-abused term, which misleadingly suggests that there is a true self; whereas the existential view is that self is relationship and process – not an entity or substance. Authenticity can also become an excuse for people who want to have their cake and eat it…crude egoism may very well be the consequence. In fact, authenticity can never be fully achieved. It is a gradual process of self-understanding, but of the self as it is created in one’s relationships to the world on all levels. Helping people to become authentic therefore means assisting them in gaining a greater understanding of the human condition, so that they can respond to it with a sense of mastery, instead of being at its mercy.’
References


Abstract
Drawing on the works of Beauvoir, Sartre and Fanon, I conceptualise my trans body’s colonisation, both by the mental health professions involved in my transition, and by Queer Theory’s appropriation of it to demonstrate the performativity of gender. I invite the reader to consider how activism might be used in therapy with trans people.

Key Words
Trans, transgender, pathologisation, queer theory, beyond the binaries

Ethical Considerations
In the following, I have used my own past experiences of the mental health system and therapy to illustrate a form of colonisation. I have consulted my current therapist about the content. I am not in contact with the mental health professionals involved in my earlier life, so have been unable to obtain their consent. I have provided a small amount of biographical information about my family, for which I have obtained consent. I write with full acknowledgement that my experiences are subjective and situated.

Introduction
When I (re)-entered therapy at the age of forty, I was unsure as to whether I should reveal my trans status to my therapist. My previous experience of pathologisation, both with psychotherapy and psychiatry, had rendered me very wary of the mental health professions, despite being a mental health social worker. I had, for more than twenty years, sequestered myself away, fearful of the consequences of being seen.

I will begin by situating the therapeutics of activism within the work of existential philosophers, Beauvoir, Sartre and Fanon. Then I will draw parallels between Fanon’s work *Black Skins, White Masks* (2008) and the phenomenology of my trans experience. I will suggest that trans people’s experiences have been colonised by the mental health professions, but also by Queer Theorists, who utilise us as a ‘liminal edge’ – as a way to reveal and disrupt gender’s performative nature, without fully taking account of the barriers to exercising the freedom to be ‘out’ and trans in a cisgender world. In so doing, Queer Theorists risk erasing trans subjectivities.

I will demonstrate that, when I transitioned, I had two options confronted
with a transphobic world: either to adopt a ‘cisgender mask’, which left me feeling alienated from my body, or to try to reclaim my body by adopting a queer identity (a ‘transgender mask’). However, this latter option failed as a strategy for dealing with transphobia because being visibly trans, within a cisgender hegemony, was an inherently inferior and potentially dangerous state of being.

Once I have charted the colonised territory, I will consider the implications for therapy. I will argue that my body is inherently politicised, and therefore that therapy is necessarily activist. However, whilst suggesting features of an activist therapy, I will not be prescribing them. I will invite the reader to think about the ways in which gender expansiveness might be explored in their own praxis.

The Therapeutics of Activism

As Tanner (2019) charts, trans bodies have become highly politicised over recent years. Amongst the controversy, it is often trans people’s lived experience which is erased, and so in attending to my own, I hope to redress the balance. As Greenslade (2018) states, amongst the varied influences of existential psychotherapies, it is in the works of the French philosophers Sartre, Beauvoir and Fanon that we find inspiration for therapies which reveal the structures of colonisation, alienation and oppression.

Central to Sartre’s earlier works is his conception of freedom as ‘radical’: we are ‘condemned to be free’ (Sartre, 2003: 462). Webber (2018: 91) explains that, onto Sartre’s idea of radical freedom, de Beauvoir superimposed the concept of ‘sedimentation’: the way that enforced social meanings constrain us and render it more difficult to adopt new projects. In her phenomenological enquiry into being a woman, Beauvoir (1997: 295) identifies ‘femininity’ as a set of values into which women are indoctrinated from earliest childhood onwards: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society.”

Beauvoir argues that this sedimentation entraps women in facticity by objectifying them and limiting what they can be. Webber (2018: 91-4) argues it is Beauvoir’s notion of freedom as sedimented (rather than Sartre’s radical version) that forms the rationale for the social activism to which Sartre also later subscribed.

Gordon (2015: 47) points out that Fanon’s title Black Skins, White Masks, the lived experience of the Black is a ‘riff’ on Beauvoir’s second volume of The Second Sex, the subtitle of which is ‘Lived Experience’. Fanon’s work is about another form of sedimentation, namely the colonisation of black bodies. Greenslade (2018: 4) suggests that this idea of colonial oppression could be extended to the “colonisation of experience occurring within the so-called ‘mental health’ professions”, and I would suggest that,
somewhere in the intersection between Beauvoir’s enquiry into gender and Greenslade’s extension of Fanon’s enquiry into colonisation lies my experience as a trans man.

Applying Fanon’s Insights: ‘Look, Mummy, is that a man or a woman?’

In ‘applying’ Fanon’s insights into the experience of colonisation to my life as a trans man, I am mindful of being tentative; I am striving to allow things to speak for themselves, rather than to apply grand theories. Within a phenomenological enquiry, theory has its place, but only as a hermeneutic device, rather than seeking to provide a causal explanation (Finlay 2011: 52). Inevitably, Fanon’s enquiry is not a perfect ‘fit’ for my experience and there are points of both similarity and divergence.

Fanon’s phenomenological enquiry is situated within the experience of French colonised rule in the Caribbean, although Webber (2018: 134-5) contends that Fanon did not intend his enquiry to be limited to this context. However, I am fully aware that there are risks inherent in appropriating an analysis of racism to apply to a phenomenon other than racism, and this is another reason to be tentative. Indeed, as I am a white person, this could constitute “one of the more pernicious enactments of white fragility” (DiAngelo, 2018: 133). That said, one crucial similarity between Fanon’s insights and the trans experience lies in the fact that it is writ on our bodies. For trans people, as Zimman (2018) contends, our difference is often visible in the size of our hands and feet, the timbre of our voices or our physical stature.

Central to Black Skins, White Masks is the application of Sartre’s (2003: 276) notion of ‘The Look’ to Fanon’s (2008: 93) experience of being pointed out by a white boy to his mother. This was the first time that Fanon realised that he was seen as an object, rather than a human being with subjectivity – rooted in facticity rather than freedom. For many trans people, something akin to ‘The Look’ is a common experience:

*Transsexual bodies appear like a monstrous or impossible space, vulnerable, an object of shame and social rejection because of their incoherently sexed image, and liable to be pointed at by others as a result of their categorisation*

(Roselló-Peñaola, 2018: 25)

I recall that, early on in my transition, I was acutely aware of ‘The Look’, to the extent that it became difficult to leave my front door. On one occasion, I heard “Dyke!” being yelled viciously at me from one end of the street, and “Poof!” from the other. The world was confused by my presentation – there was something wrong with me, even if there was no consensus as to what the problem might be.
I now have the privilege of ‘passing’ as a cisgender man in most contexts, which means that I experience ‘The Look’ less frequently than many others. Twenty-four years of testosterone therapy has given me a deep voice, a beard and a balding pate. However, I experience ‘passing’ as a curse as much as blessing. At some point, whether by literally taking off my clothes, or by undressing myself with words, anyone who comes close to me will learn about my body. Some people have accepted me; others have felt duped and have needed to prove to me what I ‘really’ am. As a man with a vagina, I am in an unintelligible state of being. I occupy a ‘barely liveable zone’ (Prosser, 1998: 11). As one disappointed (potential) sexual partner exclaimed to me: “You’re like a Christmas present that no one will want to unwrap!”

Fanon experienced a false historicity with ‘The Look’ – a connection with slavery and a ‘primitive’ past. In this respect, my experience of transition is almost the obverse of being trapped in historicity. I became an entirely ahistorical being, who could not authentically describe his gendered past without ‘giving himself away’. My history was no longer a suitable topic for polite conversation. I also lost my location within my family of origin; my parents wanted to protect me from hurt by controlling who knew about my transition. Some years post-transition, I stood next to my grandfather at my grandmother’s funeral. He told me about my sisters and how well they were doing in their lives; he had no idea who I was. I wondered what he thought happened to the young ‘woman’ (the first member of the family to study at university), in whom he had taken such pride.

Out of My Mind or In the Wrong Body? The Cisgender Mask

‘I keep silent; all I want is to be anonymous, to be forgotten.
Look, I’ll agree to everything, on condition that I go unnoticed!’

(Fanon, 2008: 96)

I first had inklings of ‘gender trouble’ when I was four years old. Going to school, I was exposed to being a girl in a gendered world, which included encountering what Lacan (1977: 384) called ‘urinary segregation’: that enforced separation of boys and girls in public toilets, and the differences between the facilities, when both genders manage to utilise the same facilities in their own homes.

I earned the nickname ‘the alien’ on account of my androgynous appearance and, as my body developed, I hid its curves under ill-fitting blazers. To manage the intense discomfort, I focused largely on my academic studies, until, once at university, I could no longer tolerate the discrepancy between my body and my sense of self. I sought out assistance from a psychotherapist through the university’s counselling service.

Psychotherapy was the first site of my colonisation. During therapy, we
discussed the fact that my mother had given birth to a baby boy, who died prior to my birth. My therapist was psychoanalytic in orientation, and conceptualised my desire to live as a man as a ‘false self’ (Winnicott, 1971: 98-101). Therapy stalled because of my lack of acceptance of this interpretation. I was referred to a psychiatrist, who expressed sadness that I had “rejected all that was feminine” in me. The prescription of antipsychotics and the admission to a mental health unit, which followed during the next year, did nothing to lift the veil of psychosis, if there was a veil to be lifted. As Fraser (2009) points out, both the interpretations of the trans experience as ‘false selves’ and as a psychotic defence were part of psychoanalytic orthodoxy of the time at which I transitioned.

The second site of pathologisation was the Gender Identity Clinic. Having fought my way out of ‘general adult psychiatry’, I found my way into this niche little area of the psychiatric system. I soon learnt that, in order to receive ‘treatment’ for my condition, I would need to provide a narrative within a narrow definition of what it meant to be a ‘man’. Gender norms were being revealed as a part of a “complex technology with which clothes, body movements and feelings [were] subject to strict inspection” (Roselló-Peñaloza, 2018: xviii).

I learnt that, when asked about my childhood heroes, ‘Julie Andrews’ and ‘Mr. Spock’ were the wrong answers – I needed to admire masculine men. I was also supposed to be a straight man, and I tried to convince myself of this, despite not being sexually attracted to women. I recall a psychiatrist barking at me: “How do you know you’re not a lesbian?” I stifled a retort to him: “How do you know you’re not?” I knew it would get me nowhere to put up a fight.

Once I commenced hormone therapy, the presence of my womb caused me no difficulties, but I felt compelled to have a hysterectomy and oophorectomy. Toze (2018) contends that the medical rhetoric of the ‘risky womb’ and the surgical interventions for trans men are part of a patriarchal notion that women’s reproductive organs are inherently pathological. Although sterilisation was not a legal requirement of transition at the time, infertility was an expectation as part of the eschewing of all things feminine; my transition came many years before the debate about trans people’s fertility rights (Nixon, 2013).

Most importantly, I realised that I needed to disavow receiving any sexual gratification from my natal body. Although I knew that I did not want phalloplasty, this could not be because sexual sensation was more important to me than the physical appearance of ‘normality’. Such an admission would have put into question my status as a ‘true transsexual’ as opposed to a ‘transvestite’ (Prunas, 2019: 54). Thus, I adopted the rhetoric of being ‘in the wrong body’, which so defines trans people’s ‘sickness’ and ‘treatment’ (Roselló-Peñaloza, 2018: 15-16), and which
alienated me from my body for years to come.

The overriding aim of ‘gender reassignment’ is to render patients’ bodies ‘intelligible’ (Butler, 2004: 57). This means that to be understood as either male or female, the body finds itself restricted to those parts that are designated as being sexual, and “only one body per gendered subject is ‘right’. All other bodies are wrong” (Stone, 1991: 297). I left the Gender Identity Clinic with social, but not sexual, intelligibility. I had received the clear message that I should live in ‘anonymity’ (Stoller, 1991: 189) to be successful in my new gender role. With that, I adopted the cisgender mask and did my best to disappear from ‘The Look’.

**Gender Outlaws, Négritude and the Transgender Mask**

The négritude movement emerged from a dialogue between French-speaking black people in Paris and those in the United States in the time of the Harlem Renaissance (Orr, 2018: 9-11). As Gordon (2015: 53-59) articulates, it was a project aimed at reclaiming blackness from its colonisers through positive affirmations in writing, art and music connecting with a pre-colonial African heritage.

When I moved to London at the age of twenty-two, I immersed myself in queer politics. I co-chaired a support group for trans masculine people and became involved in a number of campaigning and lobbying groups. My intention was to emerge again after my disappearance and be ‘out and proud’. Queer Theory’s ‘project’ for trans people seems to have some parallels with the strategy of négritude. Judith Butler (1990: 137) tries to ‘decolonise’ us by co-opting trans people into revealing the performative nature of gender, thus disrupting its hegemony. In their earlier works, they focus on ‘drag’ (cross-dressing), as they deem it to reveal the “imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency”.

Butler makes a distinction between ‘good’ drag and ‘bad’ drag, according to whether or not it reveals gender as performative. The drag queen in a gay bar is ‘good’ drag because (s)he shows how gender itself is performed in relation to the heteronormative world. Trans people who ‘pass’ are ‘bad’ drag because they are failing to occupy a radical and disruptive position: they provide “an uncritical miming of the hegemonic” (ibid: 131). Bornstein (1994: 76-7) similarly argues that trans people who maintain their view of themselves as part of the gender system are counter-revolutionaries, and that “hiding, and not proclaiming one’s transsexual status, is an unworthy stance”. Like négritude’s veneration of a black pre-colonial history, this positive affirmation of visible trans identities speaks of historical figures such as Billy Tipton, an American jazz musician who lived as a married man and adopted children despite being assigned ‘female’ at birth (Halberstam, 2000). Such histories precede the medical colonisation of ‘gender identity disorders.’
However, Fanon argues with respect to négritude, that it fails as a subversive strategy because colonised black people share white people’s internalised view of black people as inherently inferior (Webber, 2018: 141). This is part of a shared cultural collective unconscious (Fanon, 2008: 123). Similarly, I would argue, trans visibility and a connection with a ‘pre-colonial’ history fails as a strategy to deal with transphobia: being trans is, within the cultural collective unconscious, an inherently inferior state to being cisgender. This strategy also fails to take account of how dangerous it can be outside the academy, or away from performative stages, to be visibly trans, particularly if people are also subjected to the multiple oppressions of racism, poverty or ableism (Namaste, 2009: 11). Ironically, given its origins in feminism, what sometimes gets lost in Queer Theory’s ‘higher purpose’ for trans people is the lived experience of trans people and our need for physical safety (Prosser, 1998: 11-12).

I found life very difficult as a ‘gender outlaw’ back then. It was painful that I was often rejected within the queer community by the cisgender gay men from whom I sought inclusion. It was not uncommon for me to be asked: “If you like men, why didn’t you stay a woman?”, which invalidated my same gender attraction to men. The final nail in the coffin of my early visibility came from social work, a profession I was choosing for its activist credentials. I was told when applying for training courses that if I was out as a trans man, I would never be allowed to work with vulnerable people. So I had moved from being ‘disturbed’ to potentially ‘disturbing’. I felt ‘The Look’ again and disappeared.

Implications for Therapy: (Under)mining the sedimentation

Existential psychotherapy influenced by the French philosophers cannot operate in a political vacuum, and indeed Sartre, Beauvoir and Fanon all envisioned what such therapy might entail (Webber, 2018: 76-91). As stated in the introduction, when I returned to therapy at the age of forty, I was not sure whether to disclose my trans status. I had become sedimented in a project of presenting a cisgender mask to the world. However, this time around, I was met by a therapist invested in a phenomenological enquiry into my experience.

For the first few months of therapy, I used to physically shrink into the smallest possible space on the sofa. Fanon (2008: 119) articulates the way in which being able to ‘expand to infinity’ in the world is not a measure of an individual’s competence but an embodiment of their privilege. Ahmed (2006: 126) in her *Queer Phenomenology* describes how there are particular corporeal schema, which make some bodies feel more easily at home: “We might say, then, that the world extends the form of some bodies more than others…”
Ahmed argues that, for bodies that do not follow the usual contours, and for whom the sedimentation of (cis)heteronormativity are not well-worn paths, they might need particular help in being orientated, to find a place where they feel safe and comfortable in the world. A crucial part of therapy for me has been knowing where my therapist stands. I have needed a sense of my therapist’s orientation, both politically and sexually. My therapist is a cisgender gay man, and his ability to see me for who I am has been hugely reparative.

More than four years on, therapy has become a safe place for me to ‘expand’ in space. I have been able to explore the vertiginous sense I had when I took off my clothes at the end of the day and saw what others would not have expected me to see. In other words, to allow me to think about the way I had internalised ‘The Look’. I have begun to explore my sexed body and the pleasure I can derive from it. I am also extending backward and forward in therapy in non-linear time. In this way, being a trans man has become available to me as an authentic way of being in its own right, containing within it my gendered history as a girl and forging a queer trajectory into the future. I am no longer an ahistorical being.

In setting out on my project to become a therapist, I have chosen to be ‘out’ and visible as a trans man. Inevitably, given my history, this feels like a risky strategy; I am aware that others have found this a difficult path to tread. Sam Hope, a trans masculine person and counsellor writes:

I have repeatedly observed trans students and counsellors treated with suspicion or belittled or even pushed out of their courses...
Told they have ‘too much going on’ to be a counsellor. Told they might make clients uncomfortable.

(2019: 208)

It is a live question for me as to whether it is my role to make people comfortable (to avoid being ‘disturbing’) or whether discomfort and disruption are, in fact, critical aspects of both psychotherapy training and the process of therapy itself. I recently had a disagreement with a supervisor, who suggested that I remove my ‘He/ Him’ pronouns from my Zoom profile for therapy sessions, as it “said more about me than I might want to say”. Hopefully, what the presence of my pronouns conveys to clients is that I want to live in a world in which gender identity is not taken for granted, based merely on assumptions about someone’s physical appearance. Misgendering is, in my view, a form of violence. My pronouns remain on my Zoom account.

As part of my training, I now volunteer for a charity providing therapy to trans and non-binary people. I am bringing my politicised body into the therapy room, and my clients bring theirs. I try to facilitate clients to...
explore the multitude of ways in which we might embody our gender identities, or indeed, transcend gender altogether. At the same time, I take into account my clients’ physical safety in how they present themselves to the world. I therefore hope to help navigate between the Scylla of the cisgender mask and the Charybdis of the transgender mask, into clear waters in which clients can live their lives.

Activist therapy could include considering the ways in which the Gender Identity Clinics might still be constraining our ways of being by recreating the hegemony of gender norms. Such therapy might also entail considering how the diagnosis of ‘gender dysphoria’ (Fisk 1974), as part of the neoliberal agenda, teaches us that our ‘gender trouble’ inheres our individual psychology, rather than being a sign of a societal dis-ease. For many clients, working out how to ‘do’ gender is about finding a balance between making changes to their own bodies in order to express more fully who they are, and participating in making changes to the world they inhabit in order to make space for more gender expansiveness.

However, whilst making suggestions about what activism might look like when working with trans and non-binary clients, I am not providing a recipe. I would urge the reader to make themselves aware (if they are not) of the transphobia which is so rife in the world today and the impact of the ‘gender critical’ movement on the lived experience of trans people. My body is political, and therefore my engagement with trans rights is an integral part of my life. If you are cisgender, engagement may be a choice, rather than a necessity.

Fanon’s *Black Skins, White Masks* contains hope for a future in which racial categories are removed from the cultural collective unconscious, thus liberating everyone (2008: 180). Butler’s (2004) later work is a similar rallying cry to break down the structures that reduce our bodies to sexual parts, with only one set of parts per body being intelligible. In a recent radical re-think, Hansbury (2017) has even suggested that trans masculine bodies like mine could be a site of envy for cisgender men. In true existential style, we need to permit ‘both/and’ lives as well as ‘either/or’ where it comes to sex and gender (Richards, 2011). Perhaps, in this brave new world, it will be possible for me to say with pride: “I’m a man with a vagina, and I’m not afraid to use it.”

**Daniel Benjamin Jones** is a trainee psychotherapist at the Minster Centre. He is also a mental health social worker with the Enabling Assessment Service London.

Contact: dan@easl.org.uk; Enabling Assessment Service London, Kemp House, 152 City Road, London EC1V 2NX
References


Thinking Aloud
A forum to encourage, provoke and stimulate debate

Bad Faith: Inequality and discrimination within UK healthcare regulation

Dominic Macqueen

Abstract
The methods operated by UK healthcare regulators when investigating claims of practitioner wrongdoing exhibit judicial irregularities and morally questionable methods. Highlighting how and where regulators fail to execute their fitness-to-practice mandates ethically provides an opportunity for fairer and safer systems of regulatory oversight to be contemplated. Taking into consideration concepts of bad faith, this paper is an analysis of how the regulatory establishment administers fitness-to-practice procedures, and seeks to illustrate how existing approaches harm the credibility and efficacy of healthcare regulation.

Key Words
Bad faith, regulation, fitness-to-practice, ethics, judicial irregularity, discrimination

Introduction
The phrase ‘bad faith’ conjures up a mixture of thoughts and preconceptions. Those with an existential interest might distinguish bad faith as the merging of an individual’s perceptions of freedom and choice with behaviours of a self-deceiving and inauthentic nature. Commercial or legal positions would consider bad faith to be characterised by features of fraud, misrepresentation and dishonesty. Those looking at the notion of bad faith from a religious perspective might associate it to hypocritical religious worship or the exploitation of religious authority or doctrine to influence an immoral venture. From whichever viewpoint one chooses to scrutinise concepts of bad faith, pretence and deception are the pervasive attributes. Whether deemed human and unavoidable or negative and unscrupulous, bad faith serves individuals or organisations with a means by which to manoeuvre themselves through the interplay of their everyday circumstances. However, owing to an habitual (or inescapably human) component of bad
faith, there are situations where abuses of power and repetition have spread in such a way that certain harmful undertakings have become normalised. In today’s climate of accountability, where fault-finding and blame has become a pastime, the practices adopted by healthcare regulators when addressing complaints against practitioners reveal an assortment of bad faith qualities which, while appearing virtuous, have been found to cause a range of negative consequences.

**Regulatory Harm**

The fundamental purpose of healthcare regulation in the UK is to eliminate bad practice and uphold mandates for protecting the public. Underpinning regulators’ various administrative functions such as providing standards of good care and maintaining registers of approved health professionals, a key responsibility is to investigate and take disciplinary action against practitioners whose performance or conduct has been called into question. In carrying out this task, regulators use legalised procedures and consolidate numerous parties to ensure that, when they bring a case against a practitioner, the issues and allegations they formally list will be substantiated. Consequently, when a health worker faces a regulatory fitness-to-practice hearing they typically encounter the collective hostilities of:

1. the complainer and their associates (for example, family members or professional colleagues);
2. their regulator’s case manager, complaints team and registrar;
3. their regulator’s legal representation (for example, paralegals, solicitors and barristers);
4. their regulator’s witnesses; and
5. their regulator’s nominated fitness-to-practice hearing panel.

It is these accumulative features, along with the adversarial nature of regulator complaints practices, that generates the high levels of hostility and distress practitioners experience when facing fitness-to-practice procedures. This structured system, which seeks to apportion blame and denigrate practitioners – a common practice of judicial litigation in the UK – has been causally linked to practitioner suicides and ill-health, and found to negatively impact sensible patient treatment.

A 2014 report into the impact of complaints procedures and fitness-to-practice hearings upon doctors identified that between 2005 and 2013, one hundred and fourteen doctors died while under a GMC investigation, with twenty-four cases classified as suicide and a further four deaths as suspected suicides (Horsfall, 2014). A survey involving 7,926 doctors published in the British Medical Journal (BMJ), found that, of doctors who had received a complaint, eighty-four percent developed a defensive or avoidant approach...
to their work and twenty-three percent who had experienced a formal complaints process subsequently recommended invasive patient medical procedures against their professional judgement as a result (Bourne, et al, 2015). In 2015, Dental Protection (2019) reported that seventy-eight percent of dentists’ mental or physical health had been negatively affected by a General Dental Council (GDC) investigation, with thirty-four percent of dentists considering leaving the profession as a consequence. The British Journal of Social Work published a qualitative study in 2017 which reported that five out of eight participants who had faced fitness-to-practice issues had considered or attempted suicide during the investigations (Worsley, et al, 2017). Similarly, in 2018, the Nursing Standard published that “thirty-six percent of nurses receiving counselling who are facing fitness-to-practice proceedings by the NMC have thought of ending their lives” (Jones-Berry, 2018). In a 2019 detailed account by a GP of a ten-month GMC investigation that led to no action, the doctor highlighted how the conduct of the regulator had a “dehumanising effect”, and cited experiencing episodes of palpitations, migraines and hair loss (GP Online, 2019).

These findings and accounts clearly show that regulatory approaches to investigating and pursuing complaints about practitioners produce levels of distress that lead to dire consequences which cannot be reasonably justified. Epitomising bullying – which has been defined as “an imbalance of power which is used to either defame, harass, intimidate or upset another person” (BBC, 2015) – any bureaucratic process, such as regulatory oversight, which has evolved in such a way that it can reduce individuals into taking their lives exposes a catastrophic fragmenting of morality and probity.

Regulatory Ambiguity Within Healthcare

In the UK there are countless regulatory bodies that endeavour to oversee the various practitioner disciplines that function within the healthcare domains. At present there are ten statutory healthcare regulators in the UK which have the legal authority to permit or prohibit a health professional from practicing, which include the General Medical Council (GMC), the General Pharmaceutical Council (GPhC) and the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). These ten statutory bodies are themselves registered with, and regulated by, the Professional Standards Authority for Health and Social Care (PSA) which is directly accountable to the UK Parliament.

There are also voluntary practitioner organisations that act as quasi regulators, ranging from play therapists and psychotherapists to chaplains and aromatherapists. Many of these non-statutory bodies, such as the UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) and the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), attempt to imitate the statutory regulators by, amongst other things, joining the ‘accredited register’ scheme of the Professional Standards Authority (PSA) and replicating legal-styled fitness-
to-practice procedures. Problematically, the organisations that hold this accredited relationship with the PSA elicit a false assumption, by association, that their standards and powers are equivalent to those of the ten official regulators. This is not the case. Exposing misleading and bad faith features, these PSA accredited organisations are private membership groups, which hold no legal rights over individuals who carry out health-oriented services; like any social club or voluntary organisation, their powers lie only in who they wish to permit or decline giving membership to.

In addition to the legal and authority discrepancies that exist between the official regulators and those organisations belonging to the PSA’s accredited scheme, there are further discouraging issues surrounding what constitutes a qualified practitioner. Practitioners that belong to a statutory regulator, such as registered dentists or pharmacists, must complete standardised and lengthy training programmes. Yet for an individual to belong to a practitioner organisation affiliated with the PSA’s accredited scheme, this can be achieved, for example, by undertaking eight one- or two-day courses, eight online courses and three weeks of intensive training, which results in a ‘Practitioner Level Diploma’ (Human Givens Institute, 2020), or by completing a short course and passing an online assessment which states the individual has the “skills, knowledge and abilities required to be a professional counsellor or psychotherapist” (BACP, 2021). These differences in practitioner training standards, which are condoned by the PSA, undermine the importance and value of undergoing comprehensive programmes of education.

From a more commercial perspective of bad faith, this confusing and inconsistent state of affairs, which the PSA ostensibly promotes and endorses, not only misleads the public and threatens the credibility of expertise in healthcare but generates ambiguity about the functions and efficacy of healthcare regulation. Society is arguably failed when the regulatory establishment aids unclear and unreliable standards; unofficial bodies that are abetted in impersonating legal bodies plainly exposes characteristics of bad faith. Relevantly, highlighting a further incongruence, the PSA’s non-statutory accredited organisations are also able to by-pass conventional civic policies. In contrast to the legal obligations statutory regulators have towards the public, such as being transparent and providing requested information, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), for example, in 2020 was seen to exploit the fact that it is not a statutory regulator by asserting that “BACP is not a public authority and is therefore not subject to Freedom of Information requests”.1 Organisations that claim regulator status yet shun public policies devalue the integrity of the regulatory system they purport to belong to and clearly puts on display a lack of transparency and suspiciousness.
Regulatory Deviations From Legal Principles

While there are obvious features within the current regulatory apparatus that expose incongruencies and inequalities, it is the departures from established legal principles by regulators that most alarmingly and overtly compromise the reliability of regulatory oversight. Revealing what could be described as institutionalised bad faith, regulators engage with complaints about practitioner conduct in a manner that disregards legal standards which are requisites of established judicial procedure.

In order to minimise bad practice and protect the public, the UK’s healthcare regulators endeavour to ensure that complaints lodged against practitioners are exhaustively addressed and any allegations of misconduct are vigorously pursued. Subsequently, when a practitioner’s performance or conduct is called into question, their regulatory body will make a decision as to whether the complaint warrants investigation. If a regulatory body ultimately decides to pursue a complaint against a practitioner member, it will assume the complaint on behalf of the complainant (that is, the patient or institution) and formally – and adversarially – bring a case against the practitioner. However, although complaints procedures and any subsequent fitness-to-practice hearings appear to follow conventional legal processes, regulators significantly deviate from strict judicial practices.

In stark contrast to civil and criminal cases, where judges and juries are entirely unconnected to the parties in dispute, healthcare regulators seek to determine practitioner wrongdoing by employing their own judging panels to make findings on the cases and allegations they themselves have generated. In GMC fitness-to-practice hearings, for example, the GMC presents its case against a doctor before the Medical Practitioners Tribunal Service (MPTS), which “is a statutory committee of the GMC and is accountable to the GMC” (MPTS, 2021). Other regulators, such as the General Osteopathic Council or the Nursing and Midwifery Council, including some non-statutory bodies, like UKCP, directly recruit and employ individuals to hear and determine their fitness-to-practice cases. This affiliated relationship between a regulator’s fitness-to-practice hearing panel and the regulator itself exposes an overt conflict of interest; no civil or criminal matter in the UK is ever determined by judges or juries that are (knowingly) receiving payments directly from one or other of the disputing parties. While evidently abided in healthcare regulation, this would be deemed a flagrant contravention of impartiality in any other legal dispute. As is a fundamental statute of what is termed ‘natural justice’ (Oxford Reference, 2021), “no one should be a judge in their own cause” (from the Latin nemo iudex in causa sua).

This formula, in which healthcare regulators and their fitness-to-practice panels are not entirely separated, suggests a partisan dynamic which leads to the inference that any allegations brought against a practitioner cannot
be evaluated with the same degree of impartiality and fairness as is mandatorily afforded mainstream legal disputes. Organisations that essentially use their own personnel to hear and determine their own cases not only engender a marked potential for prejudicial findings but subvert the established legal tenet of an individual’s right to a fair hearing. To all intents and purposes, allegations lodged against practitioners are determined by people the allegers (that is, the regulators) are financing. Under these conditions, the principle of impartiality, a basic component of judicial remedying, is effectively suspended in matters concerning practitioners’ fitness-to-practice. This departure from established legal principles, which introduces an inherent bias to regulator fitness-to-practice proceedings, naturally contributes to the distress and harmful consequences many practitioners are known to suffer when facing accusations of wrongdoing (for example, *Daily Mail*, 2012; Harding, 2013; GMC, 2015; *Times*, 2015; Wighton, 2016; BMA, 2020).

Appealing adverse judgements determined by a regulatory body is another component of fitness-to-practice cases that raises additional concerns about judicial irregularities and conflicts of interest. For instance, when an official regulator determines that a practitioner has erred or acted poorly that practitioner has the automatic right to seek permission from the High Court to lodge an appeal against that adverse judgement. (The High Court, independently and objectively, has the power to dismiss the appeal, overturn the regulator’s panel’s decision or recommend a reconsideration of the case.) However, those organisations under the PSA’s accredited scheme do not offer this automatic right of appeal. Being private non-statutory bodies they can act unilaterally; their fitness-to-practice hearings function as kangaroo courts which are an “unofficial court set up by a group of people…to deal with a disagreement or with a member of the group who is considered to have broken the rules” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021a). As private entities they are freer to assert and implement their own fitness-to-practice prerogatives, and as such instruct and employ people of their own choosing to decide if practitioners can appeal their panels’ judgements. While negative determinations from these non-statutory groups ultimately serve only to condemn and discredit, and do not affect an individual’s right or ability to practice, fitness-to-practice procedures should, nonetheless, maintain judicial rigour. This casual way of administering fitness-to-practice cases, whereby organisations can essentially control whether appeals lodged against their panels’ decisions can go ahead, severely challenges the integrity of healthcare regulation and exposes systemic unfairness.

**Normalising Bias Within Regulation**

In addition to regulators utilising their own panels to determine their own fitness-to-practice cases, the composition of those panels brings another
element of bias to the proceedings. Unlike judges and juries in normal legal cases, the individuals employed by a regulatory body to hear a fitness-to-practice case will have usually received training of some form by that regulator. In 2015, for instance, UKCP, a voluntary membership body belonging to the PSA’s accredited scheme, revealed that it was launching specific training for its hearing panel members (Linfield, 2015). Similarly, the Health and Care Professions Tribunal Service (HCPTS), which hears the HCPC’s fitness-to-practice cases against HCPC-registered practitioners, makes reference to this training of panel members by emphasising that its Tribunal Advisory Committee “reports directly” to the HCPC, advising it “on the recruitment, training and assessment of Tribunal panellists, panel chairs and legal assessors” (HCPTS, 2020a). While all regulators maintain that their hearing panels are independent, individuals who are employed and trained by a regulator to make judgements on that regulator’s cases can never be incontrovertibly impartial. Ultimately, under this current system, panels instructed to determine fitness-to-practice cases cannot irrefutably stand independently from the influences or predisposed positions of the regulatory bodies that employ them.

Theories pertaining to cognitive biases, which are recognised psychological factors known to impact how decision-makers consider issues and form resultant opinions or verdicts, would maintain that prejudices are naturally formed by fitness-to-practice panel members as a result of being trained by the regulators that have employed them. Pertinently, in 2015, the UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) published a statement from its Chair of their Professional Conduct Committee claiming that its complaints team spends much of its time dealing with “members using any legal argument they can to attempt to circumvent UKCP investigating the allegations” (Linfield, 2015). This claim, which implies that practitioners abuse legal process “to avoid something, especially cleverly or illegally” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021b), exposes both a prejudiced attitude towards practitioners and an hypocrisy when mindful of the fact that the numerous allegations routinely listed against practitioners are generated by professional regulatory complaints teams and their lawyers. In view of this, while it is claimed that in fitness-to-practice cases the burden of proof lies with the regulator (HCPTS, 2021b), due to departures from established judicial principles, it is the accused practitioners who, in actuality, have the overwhelming task of having to convince a regulator’s panel that the regulator’s allegations are inaccurate or false.

Seeking to determine practitioner wrongdoing whereby regulatory bodies prepare, pay and instruct their own panels to make findings on their own cases institutes a real potentiality for collusion and discrimination. The vitally important criterion that an individual is presumed innocent until
proven guilty is significantly jeopardised by current approaches to fitness-to-practice cases. With partiality and features of bias being stark components of how the regulatory establishment pursues practitioners accused of failings, the long-established tenet that maintains “the mere appearance of bias is sufficient to overturn a judicial decision” (R vs. Sussex Justices, 1924) plainly highlights how regulators disregard judicial principles and suppress the rights of practitioners.

**Regulatory Double Standards**

Although criticisms about healthcare regulators concerning poor judgement or irregularities are not uncommon (for example, Dyer, 2014 & 2017; Mandic-Bozic vs. BACP, 2016; Beard s. GOsC, 2019; *Pulse Today*, 2019), regulatory bodies nonetheless remain comparatively impervious to strict or decisive penalties when found to have failed in their own duties. Exposing an incongruous latitude and complicity with regulators, the Professional Standards Authority (PSA), which notably receives funding from the regulatory organisations it officially endorses, states “We do not investigate individuals’ complaints about regulators or registers” (PSA, 2021a). This sweeping negation of inspective responsibility by the PSA adds to the view that healthcare regulation is free to operate arbitrarily and is intrinsically skewed against practitioners. With the PSA not required to open formal investigations into complaints about its member organisations, individuals who have suffered regulator faults or irregularities have little recourse other than to initiate arduous and costly legal proceedings or attempt seeking a Parliamentary intervention.

Without a separate body that has the authority to investigate complaints about healthcare regulator conduct, regulators can remain, for the most part, free to carry out activities that have been directly linked to practitioner harm and suicide. The freedoms afforded regulators was plainly highlighted in the PSA’s 2019/20 review of the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), where it was concluded that four of the five requisite standards within the HCPC’s fitness-to-practice procedures had not been met (PSA, 2021b). While this extensive failure would generally warrant some form of organisational cessation or suspension, the HCPC was free to continue operating. Evidently, a double standard is indulged whereby regulators who fail in their duties are still permitted to continue pursuing and sanctioning practitioners who are accused of failing in their duties.

Revealing another double standard feature, the PSA demonstrates blatant discrimination towards individual practitioners. A primary function of the PSA is to assess the determinations and sanctions that have been imposed by the statutory regulators’ fitness-to-practice panels upon individual practitioners. (The PSA does not assess determinations against practitioners
made by the quasi regulator organisations that belong to its accredited scheme.) Should it feel that a fitness-to-practice panel has unwisely found in favour of a practitioner or been unduly lenient, it will appeal to the High Court to have the particular case against the practitioner redetermined or apply for the practitioner to be more harshly disciplined (PSA, 2021c). Prejudicially however, the PSA has never sought to challenge findings or sanctions imposed upon practitioners which have been considered excessive or unreasonable. These anti-practitioner arrangements – which have arisen from well-intended but ill-advised bureaucratic obligations – highlight the presence of real discrimination within healthcare regulation, and reveal an autocratic quality which extinguishes any potential for regulatory interventions to generate constructive outcomes when practitioners falter; advancing insight, understanding, rehabilitation and support have been engulfed by the dispensing of blame and punishment.

While erratic regulatory processes and judicial irregularities should never placate unacceptable practitioner conduct, healthcare regulators should constantly be aspiring to act scrupulously and should not be exempted from appropriate censure when their own conduct falls short of sound regulatory practices. When a regulatory body, especially a PSA registered or accredited one, fails to act ethically or perform to agreed or requisite standards, doubts justifiably surface as to their suitability for specifically addressing matters of performance and conduct.

Sartre’s Regulatory Waiter
Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre writes about a waiter who he describes as performing waitering duties in a manner that conveys an exaggerated act; “he is playing at being a waiter in a café” (Sartre, 2003 [1943]: 59). Of course, this waiter is more than a waiter but, under an existential proclivity for bad faith, he negotiates the environment around him by acting in a way that suits what he believes is appropriate or expected of him. It might be argued that he denies his authenticity (or freedom) by feeling unable to release or present his more authentic self within the café setting; his identity exists at the mercy of his surroundings.

Relating this phenomenon to regulation within healthcare, regulators can be viewed as acting in a similar way. They present themselves to their surroundings (that is, society), as being helpful overseers of healthcare and protectors of the public. They perform this task with excessive enthusiasm, seeking to ensure that accusations of practitioner wrongdoing are proven, and the alleged offenders are unsparingly censured. Playing at being useful bodies of authority, the harm they cause is conveniently submerged beneath a self-deceit of virtuosity and righteousness. In essence, healthcare regulators perform what they presume is appropriate or expected of them as opposed
to what is actually required of them. Similar to that of Sartre’s waiter, that is, “all his behaviour seems to us a game” (ibid: 59), their behaviour is not convincingly authentic, yet their excessive and questionable methods are nonetheless tolerated and excused. This manifestation of bad faith enables healthcare regulators to operate in ways that make allowances for their own inequitable and unreliable practices. Hence, alongside problematic qualities concerning inconsistent standards, judicial irregularities and prejudice, healthcare regulators can be seen to execute an existential form of bad faith by acting in a disingenuous way that suits the particular comprehensions they hold about what regulatory obligations and responsibilities entail.

Conclusion
The consenting to inconsistent standards by the regulatory establishment points to a discriminatory culture in which regulatory bodies are able to act outside of judicial conventions while benefitting from relative immunity when their own conduct is found to be flawed or unacceptable. This duplicitous state of affairs, which exposes bad faith characteristics of hypocrisy and unscrupulousness, undermines the constructs of ‘good regulation’ that is specifically championed by the PSA (2021d). From a Sartrean perspective, the actions of the official statutory regulators, and those PSA accredited organisations that mimic them, demonstrate deceitful features; they act worthily and constructively, which diverts onlookers, to some degree, away from their more incongruous deeds. This kind of acting as introduces considerable obscurity and untrustworthiness within the regulatory establishment which, in turn, impairs the efficacy of remits intended to address practitioner mistakes or misconduct.

Most importantly, the existing methods used by regulators to address issues relating to practitioner wrongdoing do not faithfully observe the principles of natural justice, specifically the rule against bias and the right to a fair hearing. Regulatory mandates should not only exist to protect the public but should equally extend to the safeguarding of practitioners. A system of oversight that acts in a way that can cause ill-health, extreme distress and practitioner suicides not only destabilises the healthcare services but reveals serious flaws that undermine the rationale and integrity of healthcare regulation in general. The role of any effective regulatory body is to be constructive and judicious rather than autocratic and vindictive; acting in bad faith maintains the latter within healthcare regulation.

Dominic Macqueen is a Psychologist and Existential Psychoanalyst. He manages a forensic psychiatric ward’s psychology department in London and maintains a private practice in Surrey and central London. He also provides clinical supervision to medical practitioners, psychologists,
psychotherapists and trainees, and is a founding member of the Health Professionals Support Association which counsels and supports healthcare practitioners who have been negatively affected by their work. His interests lie in anti-establishmentarianism and human rights.
Contact: dominicmacqueen@thehpsa.co.uk

Endnotes

References


Mandic-Bozic vs. BACP (2016). The Queen on the application of Vesna Mandic-Bozic and British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy and United Kingdom for Counselling and Psychotherapy. High Court Judgement – Case No: CO/3036/2016.


Bad Faith: Inequality and discrimination within UK healthcare regulation


BOOK REVIEWS

I am not sure which camp you are in. Perhaps you are chomping at the bit to decamp for a summer holiday abroad, or else opting for the staycation option, or perhaps you have become so accustomed to the pleasure of the home and prefer to curl up on your comfortable sofa. Whatever your predilection, here is something to try for every taste.

Let’s start with a challenge from Spinoza’s Ethics, as translated by George Eliot. Challenging certainly but also enthralling according to its reviewer, who found his idea compatible with existential thought and useful to therapy. Before you think you prefer to avoid such a daunting work, note that Clare Carlisle, its editor, makes it accessible with her thorough introduction and copious notes. It is followed by a review of a selection of four papers/books by various editors – Bager-Charleson, McBeath, Goss and Stevens. The works all consider the area and importance of self-reflective research from the perspective of practitioners on their professional practice. The translation of the first volume of Martinez Robles’s Existential Therapy inspired the reviewer who delighted in its clarity, breadth of topics and case studies, and the unique perspective of the Mexican existentialist school which is generally omitted from the curriculum of UK training institutions.

Severson’s In the Wake of Trauma is helpful for working existentially with trauma as it takes a refreshing take on literature and arts. Adams’ Reflecting On the Inevitable is a useful book looking at my-death and other-death concepts and how to facilitate the conversations around them, important in this time of COVID.

The film Parasite is last, reviewed through the lens of the existential relationship of living with schizophrenia today, as well as on being a redundant human being, which needs to be reframed and re-educated.

Ondine Smulders
Spinoza’s Ethics

I have been sitting with this book since Lockdown One, unsure how to proceed and distracted for many months by a house move. But mainly, it was the daunting prospect of reading Spinoza’s Ethics and, not having read any other translation, I realised I was unable to make a comparison with this one by George Eliot, published to mark the two-hundreth anniversary of her birth. What was I thinking of when I offered to review this book?

I need not have worried, as Clare Carlisle’s lengthy introduction and accompanying notes make Ethics accessible and the whole book an enjoyable and interesting read. I had to take a few runs at it, but was richly rewarded.

I was already a fan of Eliot’s novels and interested to read more of Clare Carlisle’s work, having greatly enjoyed reviewing her biography of Kierkegaard (Pringle, 2019), so I looked forward to learning more about Spinoza and how his philosophy found expression in Eliot’s novels. Carlisle is not the first to investigate this but she is probably the first to do so from a scholarly philosophical perspective. She explores Eliot’s interest in Spinoza (who was not well known in England at the time) and how she came to translate his Ethics while including a discussion of her editorial and translation decisions alongside more recent English editions.

Carlisle, a reader in philosophy and theology at Kings College London, says this translation sheds light on an important phase of Eliot’s intellectual and philosophical formation in the run up to embarking on her career as a novelist. She illustrates how the meeting of minds which she describes as “a spiritual kinship…a friendship” (56) across two centuries played a part in Eliot writing what is widely acclaimed as one of the greatest novels in English, Middlemarch.

Mary Ann Evans became George Eliot in 1859 with the publication pseudonymously of her first novel Adam Bede. She completed her Ethics translation in 1856 but it was not published until 1980 when a few copies were printed by Salzburg University. In 1856, it would have been the first translation into English and a huge achievement for a lower middle-class country girl, who had left school aged sixteen and self-educated armed with her formidable intelligence and determination. By the time Eliot embarked on Ethics she was already established as a translator and reviewer, editing and contributing to a prestigious journal for philosophy and literature, The Westminster Review, and was already widely read in German, French and English philosophy and poetry. Carlisle emphasises that while we can trace some of the influence of Spinoza’s thinking had on hers, it was not her only source of inspiration.
Although Eliot’s translation was not published in her lifetime, Carlisle’s view is that she had already taken what she needed to launch her career in fiction. Carlisle’s introduction enabled me to find a way into the rather hard-going formal Ethics written in Euclidian style with Axioms, Propositions and so on, but it remains a challenging read. Through her commentary and Ethics itself, it becomes clear what an important philosopher Spinoza was, kicking over the traces of medieval thinking and in the vanguard of enlightenment thought.

Born in 1632, Spinoza was raised in Amersdam’s Portuguese/Jewish community from which he was expelled when twenty-four years old. Part I of Ethics lays out his discussion about what God is. The remaining four parts cover mind, emotion, passions and liberty, and expound his vision of what a human being is, returning at the end to theology. Most of his Ethics is concerned with human life – ways of knowing, being and acting. His philosophy is practical and his ideas lead directly to a certain way of life whose goal is happiness and liberation.

Spinoza developed highly controversial ideas on the authenticity of the Hebrew Bible and the nature of the Divine. He argued that “whatever is, is in God, and nothing can exist or be conceived without God” (84). He defined God as substance, that which exists in itself, and everything else as modes of this substance. So, Carlisle suggests, metaphorically we are as waves to the ocean. Spinoza’s God is unknowable, pervades every part of the universe, extends beyond space and time, and is definitely not a personal God. He had no time for idolatry or the unkindness of infantilising religious practice that focused on wrongdoing and punishment. He thought religion should be empowering and joyful.

Eliot was raised in a conservative Anglican tradition which she questioned and left behind, so Spinoza’s views on religion may have been an early attraction. Carlisle describes Eliot’s eventual position as “spiritually sensitive agnosticism” (24). During his lifetime, Spinoza risked death for his supposed heresy, but by the mid-nineteenth century God, and the human relationship to God, had become an open question, at least among the free-thinking circles in London that Eliot frequented. But it was Spinoza’s analysis of human emotions, his insistence on the fundamental connectedness and interdependence of human lives, and his ideas on what we are and how to live, that she absorbed and took into her novels.

Spinoza believed that our lives are shaped by our relationships with others and that realising this is vitally important and can be therapeutic and empowering. His is a philosophy of encounter and transformation, where character is a process and an unfolding. It rules out free will and is deterministic, although he says some freedom can be gained through understanding the influences that have shaped us and by making changes. This idea found expression in Eliot’s novels where some characters gain
greater understanding of themselves and their relationships while others fail to do so. *Middlemarch* ends with “there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it” (51).

Spinoza’s insight that we exist in an irreducibly interdependent web is illustrated most clearly in *Middlemarch*, where Eliot employs a narrator to make visible this interconnectedness, which cannot be fully grasped from within and to show the “elusive meeting point of determinism and responsibility” (39) in moments of decision that may lead to change and character development. She was committed to the idea of moral responsibility and, like Spinoza, believed virtue is its own rewards and vice its own punishment – as she went on to illustrate in her characters’ lives.

Carlisle suggests the strongest affinity with Spinoza lies in Eliot’s belief that human excellence lies in enlargement of soul. In Part IV of Ethics, he argued that harmonious friendships (including marriages) can be one of the most empowering conditions of human life. Eliot shows this both in well-matched marriages and others which are oppressive when partners are ill-matched, famously in *Middlemarch* where the wide-souled Dorothea marries the narrow-souled Casaubon. There are examples of the idea of enlargement leading to a fuller life, or not, throughout her fiction.

The effects of social isolation and the importance of community and engagement in the web of human life are explored in Silas Marner, whose whole being shrinks to a narrow focus on his weaving and his stash of money after he is expelled from his Christian community. He is brought back into social life through his chance meeting and adoption of an infant orphan girl.

Spinoza’s closing words to Part V are on salvation:

> *I have completed what I wished to show concerning the power of the mind over the emotions, and concerning the liberty of the mind...if salvation were close at hand and could be obtained without great labour, how were it possible that it should be neglected by almost all? But everything excellent is as difficult as it is rare.*

(316)

If we translate salvation to wisdom, we see how Eliot took this notion and wove it into her characters’ stories. And so we have the product of this unlikely encounter across two centuries between “a contemplative, celibate Jewish man [and] a passionate, not quite married English woman” (56).

I enjoyed becoming better acquainted with Spinoza’s ideas, brought to life in Eliot’s novels and made accessible in her translation which, according to Carlisle, compares well with modern translations: “In the 19th century
translation was more of an art than a science [and in Eliot’s hands] has a nice literary quality about it” (Flood & Irvine, 2019).

The Spinoza I have discovered here comes across as touchingly earnest, deeply thoughtful and kind. I was reminded recently that Bertrand Russell described Spinoza as “the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers” (Bartley, 2017). Anthony Gottlieb, who relates this, says he too fell under Spinoza’s spell. It seems Eliot did too, and Carlisle, and now me.

Readers who do not already know Spinoza’s work will find a fresh source of ideas compatible with existential thinking and relevant to therapy, and maybe even fresh inspiration on how to live and be happy.

Diana Pringle

Endnotes
1. Mary Ann Evans was a well-published and highly respected scholar by 1859. She may have chosen a male name for her novels partly to ensure her work was taken seriously as a woman in the world of fiction but also to disguise her irregular social position; at the same time she had begun living openly as an unmarried woman with a married man. *Adam Bede* was a great success and eventually she admitted to being George Eliot.

2. Carlisle traces Eliot’s remarkable ascent into the London world of letters and notes that she was self-taught in Latin, the language of *Ethics*. This is partly the reason for a number of revisions listed at the end of the book, while she got to grips with both the language and the philosophy.

3. Only God as the substance is free, “determined to action by itself alone… [whereas a mode] is determined by another to exist and act according to a certain and definite law” (74).

References


Enjoying Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research

Reflective Practice and Personal Development in Counselling and Psychotherapy

Making Research Matter: Researching for change in the theory and practice of counselling and psychotherapy

Reflective Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy

Mental health and emotional well-being have long been neglected and notoriously difficult areas to research, but a group of practitioner-researchers, of which I am a member, at Metanoia Institute has been busy over the past decade exploring obstacles and opportunities to embark upon research from the perspectives of counsellors, psychotherapists and counselling psychologists (Bager-Charleson, du Plock & McBeath, 2018; Bager-Charleson, McBeath & du Plock 2019; McBeath, Bager-Charleson & Abarbanel, 2019). These practitioner-researchers are closely associated with the Metanoia Post-Qualification Doctoral Programmes, and in particular the Doctorate in Psychotherapy by Professional Studies (DPSych). A key characteristic of this programme is the emphasis that is placed on encouraging therapists to undertake research in an area of professional practice – typically their own – which makes a contribution to the way psychological therapies are understood and applied in the real world. The programme grew out of the work of the Middlesex University Institute for Work-Based Learning. Launched in 1998, it now has in excess of one hundred and twenty five alumni, all of whom successfully undertook research on an aspect of therapeutic practice. This work has recently been recognised with the creation of a research group called Therapists as Research Practitioners (TRP). The object of TRP is to collate insights and learning highlighted by Metanoia doctoral researchers, and to enhance research training for counsellors, psychotherapists and counselling psychologists by providing learning and professional development events, and supporting research and best-practice developments. Perhaps not surprisingly, given our concern to make an impact on theory and practice, our activities have led to the creation of a number of texts and research papers, all focussing on different aspects of practitioner research.

The earliest of the four texts I am surveying, Reflective Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy, appeared in 2010. I use the term ‘surveying’ as I have
made a contribution to all but the most recent of these four texts, and so I cannot claim to have the disinterested objectivity (if such a stance can ever be said to fully exist) of an independent reviewer. I might think of myself, using research-terms, as an ‘insider-researcher’. It is not a book about research per se, since its focus is on reflective practice and how this can help us to become more aware of the ways in which we interact with our clients. Much of the text, then, is concerned with making links between theory and everyday practice. It raises a number of fundamental questions such as: Do we really work with our clients in ways that are consistent with our theoretical and personal beliefs? Do we really understand ourselves? Could reflective self-awareness help us to become more aware of how our own biases and individual backgrounds impact on how we relate to our clients? Will critical reflexivity show us how we and the wider world are linked together? Given the central role of the researcher as prime researcher in qualitative inquiry, we can see how these questions have relevance for us as researchers. Indeed, if we replace the word ‘client’ with ‘research participant’, it will be evident that reflective self-awareness is as important for qualitative research as it is for clinical practice. A chapter by Biljana van Rijn shows how evidence-based practice and reflective practice are complementary, while another that I contributed turns the relationship around to look at the relevance of therapy research to everyday therapeutic practice.

I outlined a case in the pages of *Existential Analysis* way back in 2004 for re-thinking the notion of research, and its place in training programmes. I argued then that, in important respects, the whole of training could usefully be regarded as a training in research, and I continue to hold this view today. It is a mistake to think of research as a hurdle in the form of a post-graduate dissertation to be ‘got over’. If we take this view, then for many – probably the majority – it will be got over like a nasty dose of influenza, an unpleasant experience to be avoided ever after. Instead, we need to take more seriously the idea of research as a personal journey of discovery, a continual transformative process rather than a discrete event, or something you do just once or twice in your life to gain a qualification. Research must not, of course, remain only of personal significance if it is to have any impact on professional practice – it must be disseminated and evaluated by our peers, colleagues and clients.

There is a tension which I have noticed in my work as an external examiner over the years between a tendency for students on humanistic trainings to believe that their internal locus of evaluation is paramount, and students on broadly psychodynamic trainings to feel answerable (though they may not use the language) to an external locus of evaluation. Meanwhile, there is a tendency among existential trainees to fall back on a few ‘standard’ methodologies – those of Colaizzi or Moustakas and, increasingly in the last decade, on Jonathan Smith’s Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.
This tendency can lead to an approach which is every bit as mechanical as the unthinking application of a quantitative research tool. There is a danger that the underlying philosophical notion of the co-created world could be lost in this ‘leap to the known’. I have often been invited to assess dissertations that do not include the researcher’s self-analysis or any attempt at imaginative variation, or, for that matter, a return to the co-researchers toward the end of the process to check the validity of an exhaustive description. Either the self of the researcher disappears or they are present in the guise of ‘expert’. And concomitantly our sense of the self of the research participants is also reduced. More prosaically, when research is reduced to a pre-determined number of specific steps it is surprisingly easy to miss a few out. It is like missing out an ingredient when you bake a cake – the result may still resemble a cake but it will not taste very good.

Good research seems to me to be a living thing; it should leap off the page to revitalise some aspect of our way of being as therapists. In doing so it mirrors the characteristic of good therapy, that there is a genuine connection between the meaning worlds of client and therapist and, in the meeting, some sharing of experience. Research that is dead on the page cannot be resuscitated to invigorate practice. At best, like Frankenstein’s creature, it will only be a poor clumsy attempt to mirror living vitality. One test of this is our reaction when we read a research report: do we recognise some ‘truth’ about the human condition? Do we say to ourselves, “That reminds me of what happens in my own clinical practice?” Do we feel inspired to, perhaps, look more closely at some aspect of the way we work? Does it speak to us? Is it capable of moving us?

The second text that I want to mention, Making Research Matter, was distinctive when it was published in 2016 in consciously moving away from the ‘how-to-do-research’ approach of which numerous examples exist to present a range of successful real-world research projects, in order to show how they made a difference to theory and practice, and how they came about. It explicitly discusses and illustrates how practitioner-researchers can develop research tools and carry out investigations with rigour in ways that are congruent with their training and practice. In doing so, it aimed to take seriously the injunction that, if it is to impact on professional practice, research should be disseminated to the most relevant audiences, and should be evaluated by our peers, colleagues and clients. The book actively sets out to challenge the much talked-of practice-research gap by demonstrating ways in which it can be bridged through practitioner research. The contributors – all experienced, senior professionals – share their knowledge and insight about research that makes a difference, and what the process of producing it really involved, including its impact on themselves. Their reflexive voices are included in the texts as integral to the process, providing vivid insight into the lived experience of their research journey.
If we set out to inspire practitioners to engage in qualitative research, and to do so not just in the course of their training but regularly throughout their subsequent careers, there is evidence that such encouragement continues to be needed. In a recent paper, Dr. Sofie Bager-Charleson, Dr. Alistair McBeath and I (2020) undertook a comprehensive literature review which highlighted how often published studies have describe therapists’ research activity as ‘limited’ and their research knowledge as ‘unstructured’ or ‘patchy’. This paper evidenced that therapists, historically, have rarely initiated research. Rather, we discovered:

- Therapists rely more on discussions with colleagues than on research.
- Therapists’ knowledge around research tends to be ‘patchy’ and in-depth knowledge is associated with topics of personal interest.
- Therapists are, for instance, more informed by clinical experience, supervision, personal therapy and literature than by research findings.
- Therapists’ research also often stems from an unstructured integration of knowledge gained from workshops, books and theoretical articles.
- Therapists do read research but not as often as researchers in other fields do.
- Therapists tend to be critical of the clinical relevance of much research and also about the clarity of presentation.
- Therapists and researchers are developing disconnected bodies of knowledge.

It is to be hoped that the demand which has led to a second edition of Bager-Charleson’s 2010 *Reflective Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy* indicates to some extent an increasing interest on the part of practitioners to embark on qualitative research. The revised 2020 text, *Reflective Practice and Personal Development in Counselling and Psychotherapy*, published by Sage, includes an invaluable chapter, ‘Reflecting on practice with research’, which provides a highly accessible way of increasing interest on the part of practitioners to embark on qualitative research.

The most recent addition to the stable of texts from Metanoia is Bager-Charleson & McBeath’s *Enjoying Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research* (2021). This book sets out to make a significant contribution to continuing the development of a rigorous and creative research-supported practice for practitioners, researchers and students of counselling and psychotherapy. With an emphasis on critical thinking and ‘research mindedness’, it introduces practical research skills and links them to self-awareness and critical reflection. Bager-Charleson, McBeath and their authors outline the use of a broad range of research methods, embracing arts as well as RCT-based research, and cover qualitative, quantitative, pluralistic and mixed methods approaches.
In doing so, they aim to support anyone looking for a book that combines self-awareness with analytical and practical skills.

The opening chapter explores some of the differences and similarities between quantitative and qualitative research, and distinguishes between qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research, establishing the issue of research supported practice as an underlying theme. This chapter aims to support a research-based practice, aided by considering the multiple routes into research. A particular strength of the book is its comprehensive discussion of qualitatively-driven mixed methods, and chapters on doing quantitative research using statistics, surveys and outcome measures. The authors make a convincing case that an understanding of these tools is vital if therapists are to be able to engage with, and critique, evidence-based practice and studies of therapeutic efficacy. Readers are encouraged to familiarise themselves with approaches ranging from phenomenological experiences to more nomothetic, generalising and comparing foci like outcome measuring and RCTs. The book introduces us to a range of research, informed throughout by an interest in both separate approaches and also inductive-deductive combinations, as in Grounded Theory, together with pluralistic and mixed methods approaches. The driver here appears to be a shared aim of providing support in the field of mental health and emotional wellbeing. Subsequent chapters on phenomenological research, IPA, narrative inquiry, grounded research and more, illustrate ways therapists can build an evidence base born out of clinical practice, and emphasise the value for practitioners to continue to engage with research and question our daily practice.

The arc which these four texts describe takes us on a journey in which confidence in reflexive practice lays the foundations for rigorous real-world research where the reflexivity of the practitioner-researcher is harnessed and their unique insights are fully recognised. This, in turn, acts as a feedback loop showing not only that practitioners are motivated to undertake qualitative research, but that when they do their work can enrich both how we understand what it means to do research, and how we think about therapeutic practice. Finally, this arc seems to recognise how practitioner-researchers are increasingly moving out of their traditional qualitative research methodology, to work confidently with quantitative and mixed methods.

I would like to suggest that, collectively, these texts provide both a valuable response to the ‘theory-practice’ divide, and offer an invitation and stimulus to practitioners to really recognise the value of their individual and unique contributions as practitioner-researchers to changing and improving therapeutic practice.

**Simon du Plock**
References


Existential Therapy: Relational theory and practice for a post-Cartesian world, Volume 1


I am left with an overwhelming sense of inspiration after I finish Yaqui’s book. As a trainee existential therapist, it has provided me with a fresh understanding of, and curiosity around, some of the central underpinnings of an existential-phenomenological approach. I feel renewed excitement as I begin to forge my own unique existential therapy way.

Having read a number of set texts for my training, I can honestly say that Yaqui’s book stands out as one that covers a vast and diverse theoretical landscape with clarity, uniqueness and personality. His style is accessible, welcoming and questioning. I felt empowered and encouraged to consider my own responses to the theory and practical anecdotes offered. Yaqui’s character and own personal style of existential therapy, which includes enriching perspectives from Mexico, contributes to a depth and breadth I have at times found lacking in other existential texts. The theoretical ground covered is broad, and my understanding has developed considerably through Yaqui’s concise and clear writing.

More than merely educational however, for me the experience of reading this book was enlivening and thought-provoking. I devoured it within a couple of weeks and have already returned to it a number of times. Both in
style and content, it is a uniquely exciting and enriching book, and I hope it gets the place it deserves on all existential-phenomenological reading lists. The book explores all the main themes and topics I expected to find in such a volume, but the way in which he explored them is distinctly unique. He is engaging in how he combines a breadth of perspectives from across the existential-phenomenological world, integrating them in a unique and exciting manner. It helps the book stand out from some of the more repetitive ground covered in many other such works.

The book begins with a stimulating foreword by Ernesto Spinelli, who rightly warns the reader to prepare to be “challenged, surprised and entranced”. The first chapter outlines existential therapy as a philosophically-inspired approach that steers clear of techniques and clinical tendencies to pathologise. Yaqui explores what he means by the ‘therapeutic world’ and considers some of the similarities and differences between existential therapy and existential coaching, prompting the reader to make their own connections.

In the following chapter, Yaqui provides a comprehensive and accessible history of the phenomenological-existential perspective, taking the reader through the developments in phenomenology, hermeneutics and phenomenological psychology, before going on to explore their contributions to existential-phenomenological therapy. He then, helpfully and succinctly, considers some of the main thinkers and pioneers of existential therapy, including some from South American and specifically Mexican traditions, which I have found to be missing from other texts. The chapter concludes with a look at the key differences between the existential model and other approaches to therapy, a section, which I found especially helpful in enabling me to clarify through my own experience why this particular approach resonates with me and why others may not. This part of the book was helpful in prompting me to clarify what it is that I find to be unique about an existential-phenomenological approach, and its compatibilities (or not) with other styles, particularly in regard to its particular view of personhood. Yaqui’s exposition of existential philosophical foundations, his description of his therapeutic attitude or ‘ethos’ and his exploration of the phenomenological method are helpful and enlightening.

Rightly so, in my opinion, the next chapter is by far the longest. It covers a huge amount of ground exploring the relational paradigm. Following an initial comparison with the intrapsychic paradigm, Yaqui discusses the foundations of a relational view of existence, as well as some of the difficulties of accepting such a perspective. He moves on to discuss how the relational view applies to therapy and the therapeutic relationship. For me, this is the most enriching section of the book. Yaqui takes the reader through an exploration of therapeutic dialogue, the art of listening and the move away from a one-way perspective towards a reciprocal one. He describes with enthusiasm the importance of an attitude of not-knowing, and how the
uncertainty that comes with it opens up a spaciousness within the therapeutic encounter. I found his notes on transference and counter-transference helpful; as he acknowledges, questions around these concepts arise frequently amongst his students. He clarifies why, phenomenologically speaking, it makes no sense to distinguish between a transferential relationship and a real one, noting that the therapeutic relationship is always real and always mutual (and always requiring elucidation). Yaqui concludes this chapter with a persuasive argument for a relational approach as a necessary and important post-Cartesian proposal.

The final chapter explores existential therapy as a post-modern approach and interpersonal encounter. Yaqui describes how a relational, process-based, non-dualistic approach goes against claims of any theory as truth, including existential perspectives themselves. He argues that a loyalty to phenomenological principles requires us to accept that none of us knows the truth of the human condition – all we can do is analyse and reflect on our experiences of it. Yaqui goes on to explore the possible scope and objectives of existential therapy as an interpersonal encounter. He discusses who the existential therapist might be, emphasising that ultimately what matters most is who the therapist is, not what they do; the how rather than the what of our encounters with clients. As fully human, fully fallible co-adventurers, Yaqui reminds us that ultimately “all we have is our experience, and our inter-relational way of experiencing it” (376).

His writing manages to maintain clarity and accessibility without compromising on nuance; he has a way of describing complex ideas by bringing them to life through his own practice and lived experiences. The examples and vignettes peppered throughout his exploration of the theory are invaluable, as well as often fun and moving. He does not shy away from difficult topics or uncomfortable moments with clients. His honesty and experiential inclusivity shine throughout the book in a way that I think anyone interested in the existential approach, however experienced, will find enriching. Not least, this is clear through his integrationist mestizo approach and the unique perspective he brings from the Mexican School of Existential Therapy. This book is an exciting addition to the existing literature; an important reminder of the fresh definitional possibilities each and every one of us bring as existential therapists, and a call to seek out plurality and diversity in our reading, connections and dialogues.

Yaqui’s book is more than mere words and abstract theory. Reading it was an enriching experience that far exceeded a mere intellectual activity. I was left with that feeling of disappointment and loss that comes when you finish a really good book, as well as an energy and inspiration that I must confess I have not always felt when finishing other theoretical texts. As I embark on my training, I am reminded to actively seek out a diversity
of voices, ideas and influences, and to question what perspectives I might be missing. Before being gifted this book I did know I was missing it. And yet I now await with impatience for Volume 2 to be published in English.

Sarah Hopkins

In the Wake of Trauma: Psychology and philosophy for the suffering other

Upon receiving In the Wake of Trauma, I was keen to jump straight in. The cover depicting a solitary tree with calming sun on one side and a moody storm on the other was tantalising. The sub-heading, Psychology and philosophy for the suffering other, further hinted at an enthralling read. Upon completion, I cannot confess to it being an easy read. However, it is a worthy addition to any trauma library. The following review will attempt to pull out the key aspects of the book.

The editors’ opening introduction sets the book’s objective clearly; the aim is to start a conversation. It brings together a set of chapters, not necessarily to offer any ground-breaking new theories on trauma, but to instigate thought, critical thinking and to collate some of what is already laid out before us in the trauma field. The book also positions itself more towards client-facing readers, conveying thoughts on how the text can be applied in a therapeutic setting. As with any book that is a collection of papers, the reader finds oneself drawn to some chapters while less captivated by others. For me, it was more a case of a book of two halves, with half filled with trauma as represented in the arts and the other half more traditional philosophy and psychology writings.

In that vein, the chapters that position trauma in the context of its portrait within the arts do so predominantly in play and literature. I felt the offer of a pre-reading list might have been useful. A chance to refresh on texts such as James Joyce’s Ulysses, Shakespeare’s Hamlet and the biblical book of Job would have made for a more informed read. In parts, I forgot I was reading chapters on trauma rather than literary critique. However, there was much to be considered from the offerings, especially in terms of how practitioners might use the texts to reflect on client’s trauma within the therapy room.

Chapter One documents a conference discussion between those defined as scholars, namely Severson, Critchely, Pellegrini, Kearney and Skerreett. What transpires in the debate is an agreement that Hamlet is a text about failed mourning, love and desire. In considering the notion of suicide is the thought that beliefs about an afterlife are often paradoxical, between belief in an afterlife and belief in nothing following life. Observing how
those in distress navigate the paradox of these two positions can see both leading to fear. The philosophical debate leads to anxiety regardless. We either believe what we are creating in life might carry forward after death, taking the good and the frightening bad along with it, or upon death all is lost and life was meaninglessness. Such paradoxes are important when considering a client who is encountering grief.

Similarly, there is the dilemma of love and loss. In *Hamlet* every love is compared to his father’s, but how can clients process every other love being lesser than the one they may have lost? *Hamlet* becomes an acting out of Hamlet’s desires from the safety of his evolving play; within script Hamlet can learn how he has been the helm of his mother and father’s desire to the point that his desires can only begin to surface when one of them is lost. The chapter highlights how people can become ‘lost’ in others and how the arts can provide a distance through which to explore the client’s processes.

The chapter on St Augustine’s body also predominantly identifies the conflict of living in paradox. Manoussakis uses Augustine’s most aspired work *Confessions* to detail his transition from youth into the faith of Christianly as a basis for exploring the gap that often exists between people’s impulses or will and their rational thoughts. The chapter specifically tries to capture what individuals do when the body wants one thing and the mind another. Here existential theory enters the debate, specifically Merleau-Ponty’s embodiment stance. In doing so, the reader is left questioning how much of the body is included in therapeutic encounters; how trauma both connects with and disconnects from the body and mind; the role of the body in self-deception and self-awareness; and our sense of lived experience.

We return to *Hamlet* in the next chapter along with *Ulysses*. The key theme of the piece is to illustrate how in writing the impossible can be played out, that narrative can help manifest a chaotic process by playing with ideas, namely by offering a way for those experiencing trauma to work through their trauma history. Kearney offers up Shakespeare’s characters as able to repeat the trauma and tragedy, and uses Freudian discourse on the need repeat to help work through. In writing, or indeed reading other trauma-related works, clients might find a way to bring a trauma that is too much for words into the light. They can play out different endings and explore aspects of their experiences that are thus far lost in translation.

Whilst most writings on trauma avoid association with the word ‘broken’, in ‘Being Broken and Unbroken’ Chalfin does not shy away from the term, often colloquially used, to describe the feeling after trauma by survivors. It is perhaps not surprising to find this is the chapter where existential philosophy dominates, namely in the examination of Heidegger’s application to trauma. The chapter examines what it is to be broken, perceived here as a by-product of vulnerability; to be unbroken takes courage. It draws
on Heidegger’s theory that to be authentic, one needs a degree of shattering or brokenness. However, in the case of trauma, often Dasein will lack the required attunement with the body and feelings to achieve authenticity. Thus, Dasein becomes overly aware of the ever-presence of death. The conclusions drawn in working with trauma clients is to help reinstate attunement and assist in an acceptance that the individual at this point now needs to take responsibility for their victimhood.

Moving away from individual trauma, Houck-Loomis provides insight into the collective and generational aspect of trauma. Using the biblical text of the people of Israel, the reader is journeyed through how historical trauma can become the narrative of generations thereafter. It concludes that whole communities can become ‘traumatised people’. What is then important is looking into the unremembered. A client who finds it difficult to make sense of fears that are passed down may find understanding once they can be contextualised in their historical narrative by looking at the gap between the individual and the collective history narrative.

Novak’s Chapter Eight felt particularly relevant in a world where the loss of loved ones appears at the forefront of the COVID-19 experience. With the help of a case study, a client who has lost a romantic lover, it makes for one of the lighter chapters. While there is no denial of the client’s pain, what emerges is the relational aspect of loss and by counterpart the relational aspect of healing. The study demonstrates how exploration in therapy can help move a relationship with a loved into a posthumous one, reframing it from complete loss into perhaps a different type of relationship but a relationship, nevertheless.

Moving on, there is an opportunity to consider suffering. Richardson and O’Shea critique modern psychology for its part in denying the full experience of pain and suffering. The pair offer suffering as a concept beginning at birth and specifically visible through mothering. A mother brings a child in the world, and such joy is only available at the denial of reality. The reality is the pain the world will infuse upon the child throughout the course of their life. Suffering, in general, is viewed as an illness, whereas a more ontological approach might present as a more effective way of helping clients being-in-the-world. Yalom and May are presented as examples of such client work, as they assist clients in viewing the uncertainty of the world as the more usual way of being while certainty are rarer moments of experience.

This book is undoubtedly a refreshing read for those with a love of literature and the arts. It brings to life how the arts can be useful in expanding thoughts on trauma and how therapists can apply them in their work. *In the Wake of Trauma* is a helpful read for those working with trauma in an existential way even though it does not contain lots of existential theory
or new ideas. The book does, however, achieve its aim of providing a variety of papers it gives the reader much to converse on.

April Mangion

**Reflecting On the Inevitable: Mortality at the crossroads of psychology, philosophy and health**


“Whenever I try to think of my own death I end up muddled and confused” is the first sentence the author writes in the preface of the book *Reflecting On the Inevitable*. The exploration of ‘my-death’ as opposed to ‘other-death’ is the main subject matter the author has dedicated this book to. Presumably the intention of the author was to get to a more clarified place by the end of the book and assist the reader in that journey of clarification in turn.

Clearly the topic is an important one, maybe more so at this time, when the global pandemic of the coronavirus has meant a confrontation with death in a way unknown for a long time in the West. For over a year there have been extended and intermittent lockdowns in order to ‘keep safe’ and ‘save lives’, and the virus has been a relentless media subject. Bombarded with the daily chronicle of death figures, stories emerged of those who have lost someone dear or had a brush with death with recoveries that sometimes included long-COVID.

What better time to think afresh about our relationship with death? The book has certainly kept my-death close by, perhaps more in the form of a background hum of uncomfortableness residing quietly in the shadows, always tinged with the pandemic and lockdown blues chugging by now faithfully alongside the uneventfulness of the collective mundaneness of COVID existence.

Sadly, the book has not added much to what I might already know, or at least sense I know, about death, nor has it managed to bring me closer to a clarified place of my-death. Perhaps, as the author alludes to, this is an impossibility. And yet, I feel this is a missed opportunity.

The author seems to have tackled the subject in an uninspiring manner. Both the title (exasperatingly not containing the word death) and the structure of the book have felt muddled and confusing throughout, so that I had to keep checking and re-checking what the argument at hand was and what the author was trying to get at.

Completing my read of the book, I must admit with relief, I will try to summarise in three points what I think the author was grappling with and trying to convey. First, our focus on other-death is much easier than focusing on my-death, and research and conversations around death are generally conducted with other-death in mind. Next, given the elusive nature of
my-death, it is almost impossible to get a handle on it, but the focus of the exploration can be greatly helped and enhanced by seeking conversations with others about death that touch on topics such as fears, beliefs, cultural background, actual experiences of illnesses, accidents or death of loved ones and so on. Clarifying your particular framework of death contributes to finding more peace with the inevitability of it. Third, he suggests a need to widen conversations around my-death to all domains of life as it enhances people’s engagement with life itself. It is enriching, it lessens the fear of death and it can give a sense of serenity, and brings people closer together in the contemplation of this profound phenomenon.

There was a strange back-to-front sensation with the book. Firstly, before embarking on his journey, I wanted to know why the author had chosen this topic and how his views might have changed in the process of researching and writing. He gives us a glimpse in the conclusion where his first sentence starts “I found this book difficult to write and did not anticipate it being so challenging”. I found that interesting. But it would have helped to set the scene if he had shared this in a comprehensive way with the reader at the beginning. It would also have achieved the all-important naming of the context. I wished that the author would have started the book with (my previously mentioned) point three, rather than build the argument up throughout the book to reach his conclusion at the end. It was a frustrating and long-drawn-out ride.

Instead he chose to introduce the reader to four invented characters, Stan, Leo, Mandy and Brenda, who take us through a journey of discussions and conversations with each other and chart their change in thinking around my-death to reach the conclusion that culminates in a special three-course dinner they share. I feel this was not done successfully.

The characters often lacked credibility and the way they related to each other and discussed the topic was rather unlikely. This would have been okay if the author would have made an explicit point of that at the beginning, explaining why he chose to incorporate these people into the book and to what end. Annoyingly, the author mentions some of this at the end of the book, by which point my exasperation about this stylistic choice had reached exhaustion point.

Moreover, palliative care is a well-documented movement that has helped death conversations greatly, as have death cafés, both of which the author talks about insufficiently towards the end of the book. Again, this could have been a really useful starting point in order to illustrate his view that other-death is initially easier to think about than my-death.

Unfortunately, the above points of criticism have seriously gotten in the way of my ability to take the finer points of the book on board. I shall try to briefly summarise as best as I can, as I wish to honour the hard work
the author no doubt has put into writing this book. As far as I understand the author identified what he called four enabling frames: Essential Structures; Passionate Suffusio; Point-of-Transition; and Self-Generative Process. These frames are meant to assist a person (or the academic?) to clarify their views and their relationship to my-death presumably, but I remain baffled as to what exactly these frames mean so that I can only describe them in a limited way.

It seems to me that the author loosely mapped the four enabling frames onto the four characters, perhaps at the service of clarification, but to me this muddled the subject matter further. Or perhaps this is me trying to organise the material by doing this mapping, in which case I ask to be forgiven if that is not what the intention of the author was. However, this is what I understood. The frame of essential structures seems to be mapped onto Leo (a young man, son of Mandy, age unspecified); the passionate suffusion frame was mapped onto Stan (living on his own with his dog, in his eighties, a neighbour); the point-of-transition frame was mapped onto Mandy (Leo’s mother, widowed, age unspecified); and the self-generative process frame onto Brenda (Mandy’s lodger, a health professional working in palliative care, age unspecified).

As the youngest, Leo believed staunchly until the end that there is total annihilation and nothingness after death, and grappled on and off with why there was any point in living at all if that was the end result. He was fascinated by Heidegger and his concept of finitude.

Stan, the oldest, changed his perhaps un-reflected position to embracing life wholeheartedly after suffering a heart attack that almost killed him. This re-oriented him towards an idea that life and death are on a continuum, held together through some sort of electrical charge. His life thereon felt very much worth living, as death was a continuous reminder of the validity of life. He was also intrigued by Heidegger and the concept of finitude and seemed to take it further than Leo, having life experience on his side.

Mandy was the most resistant character to talking about my-death. She worried greatly that Leo, her son, was too morbid and or too negative about life/death, but resolved this by re-affirming her belief in an after-life in the process of the many conversations. Finding this position comforted her a great deal as it was linked to her Catholic upbringing, which still appealed to her as a framework; this was not shared by the other three characters.

Lastly, Brenda who worked in palliative care, thought that she had a good grasp on death, but realised through their conversations that it was other-death rather than my-death she was focusing on. This threw her into crisis, but she finally came to the conclusion that my-death was a process, negotiated continuously through the ups and downs of life.

When the four of them meet at the end of the book for the special dinner...
celebrating Stan’s recovery, they appreciate their process of sticking it out with each other, thinking me-death through with each other, getting to a place of acceptance that everybody has their own take on me-death influenced by their lives and background, and that this was okay. Each one was happy with the conclusions that they had drawn for themselves for now and felt enriched by, and more bonded through, their conversations.

The characters – and this is presumably the author’s view – wondered how such conversations could be facilitated in other domains, so that others could benefit from this positive outcome too.

I agree with this conclusion. It seems that people would benefit from talking more in-depth with others about their own death and deepen their beliefs and frameworks of understanding. If not, we are ruled by fear which has the ability to shrink one’s world, limit one’s ability to explore and shuts down new possibilities. Existential-phenomenological psychotherapy would be well-placed to facilitate such conversations both for individuals as well as groups. The author, however, does not make a leap from Heidegger, who gets explored but in quite a confusing way, to existential-phenomenological psychotherapy as a way of opening up these conversations, which I find a little surprising.

I also got the impression that the author secretly belittled the idea of an after-life, which he seemed to link to religion. That would have been alright as a stance had he declared at the start of the book his own beliefs and how these might have changed through this process. Alas, this remains unknown. Given that I personally feel comfortable with the idea of re-incarnation and believe that death is a passing into a different realm as real as earthly-physical life, I did not feel represented in the book.

My long-standing meditation practice informs my views and provides me with reassurance, something of a calm place. Buddhists in palliative care, for example, have an interesting approach to me-death where the willingness to meet death as consciously and mindfully as possible is part of their philosophy of both life and death. There is a famous Zen Buddhism saying that goes “Doing zazen is like entering your own coffin”. I understand this statement. Meditation can feel at points like dying, or the confrontation with something dark, or life suddenly seems a little insignificant…perhaps meditating on a regular basis is some form of rehearsal for me-death?

The explorations of the author feel a bit limited in their scope and could have included many more interesting practices or philosophies that meet my-death quite deliberately. The assisted suicide movement is another example that meets square my-death and many fascinating documentaries have been made about that. There is a beautiful and moving film called Griefwalker (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLQWM2j3AVg) that talks about embracing and choosing death in order to be able to embrace and chose life (and vice versa). Watching it re-affirmed a sense of peace,
a feeling held and reassured that death is not horrible or out of the ordinary, but rather extraordinary in its ordinariness in its partnership with life.

The topic of my-death is fascinating and the main concern of the book to have facilitated conversations with others is a really worthwhile project. I am not sure it achieves that in any successful way but it has certainly encouraged me to want to look further. The death cafés are mentioned just in passing, yet I feel they represent a practical way to have conversations about my-death. These cafés are run in a non-expert way, where people from all walks of life share views and beliefs about death, no doubt coming away richer than before they entered that process.

Sara Angelini

Parasite
Dir. Bong Joon-Ho, 2019.

The Korean peninsula seems to be a bridge between its neighbours China and Japan; from the southeast extremity, sweeping northwards. Throughout its history the country has frequently been subjected to threats of invasion, and more recently Korea has served as a battleground between Communist and non-Communist forces fighting for control. My perceptions of contemporary Koreans are absolutely delightful, and most agreeable, having studied at Moscow State University.

*Parasite*, directed by one of the world’s most exciting, masterly and fascinating of talents, is an utterly unique work that earned four Oscars and a Palme d’Or. There has been a whirlwind of publicity around this international box-office smash, making the viewing of this global, modern movie all the more welcome, and a remarkable experience. Described by its creator as “a comedy without clowns, a tragedy without villains”, *Parasite* is a fiercely original, multi-genre adventure. This black satire could be characterised as a melancholy ghost story, with the highly topical theme of being ‘unemployable’ in a harsh capitalist society. So, if there is a villain in the film, it is capitalism and its structures that force people into indignity and desperation. It could be said that this film is difficult to talk about, as it defies any pigeonhole, and could be considered both a mainstream crowd-pleaser and an arthouse masterpiece.

The Kim family live in a grim bug-ridden basement flat, earning an uncertain living folding pizza boxes. They have seen better days. The Parks however, live a life of privilege in a striking hill-top mansion, surrounded by fabulous greenery, well-shielded from the outside world. Bong clearly foregrounds a distrust of wealth and authority, with the Parks being “only nice because they are rich”. *Parasite* sees the impoverished Kims ingratiate themselves into the glamorous lifestyle of the wealthy Parks…and milk
the situation. The Parks’ lifestyle is one that relies upon hired help: tutors, a chauffeur and a housekeeper. This situation is milked by the streetwise Kevin Kim who realises that his own family could easily take on these roles, and so he talks himself and his relatives into a life of advantage. Eventually, what really drives the characters over the edge is not so much lack of opulence but lack of respect for the social status divide. It is a world of vertical non-integration that the film thrillingly explores – the depravity lurking beneath apparently tranquil surfaces.

For me, even the title of the film is a hugely contentious issue; who are the most parasitic individuals in the story? Obviously the Kims wish to leech off the wealth of others, but what about the Parks who have been rendered infantile and helpless by their fortune, relying entirely on working-class servants to complete even the most simple of tasks. This social commentary makes the film remarkably relevant to our own contemporary national culture of the ‘haves, and the have-nots’ and benefit lifestyle generally.

To my mind, two scenes illustrate this vital theme, of how power is psychically reflected in their class system. Firstly, when the former devoted housekeeper Moon-Gwang and her husband manage to control the Kims via blackmail with her mobile phone: “Honey, this ‘send button’ is like a missile launcher. If we threaten to push it, those people can’t do anything. It’s like a North Korean rocket”.

This nuclear bomb-type culture is the language of the most financially poor, vulnerable sphere of their civilization; reliant on state intervention generally and the sitting out of the insincere nightmare of capitalism in the safety of their bunkers. Undeniably there are many witty, humorous moments like this that are an ironic, tonal riot which is insanely entertaining. The viewer should be ready for a deeply sardonic trip, that is, in all respects intensely compelling.

Shifting to the opposite social realm, Park states critically of Ki-Taek his new chauffeur: “But that smell crosses the line…” and “People who ride the subway have a special smell.” This is a perfect example of elitist snobbery and a tool that Bong utilises to debate crucial collective issues.

Amusingly, however, when the wealthy, moneyed couple make love, they consider the working-class as a turn on: “Isn’t this like the back seat of the car?” and then the uptight wife, Yeon-Kyo imitates their fantasy of a wild Korean ‘commoner’, blabbing: “Then buy me drugs. Buy me drugs!” and passion ensues before they fall asleep.

The main reason for reviewing this film would have to be its existential relationship to living with schizophrenia in today’s world; the concept of the ‘unemployable’, superfluous, forgotten individual, trying to survive against all odds. The implication of the redundant human being is always a challenge and maybe the driving force behind existential analysis. To
reframe, re-educate and recycle the schizophrenic is the type of philosophical dilemma that could be said to be reflected in this picture. The fact is that while you are reliant on state benefits due to mental health difficulties, you are often seen as an outlaw, or a parasite, and subjected to extreme prejudice in the UK, in these times. Tragically, the film culminates on a Shakespearian note, taking a twist like the fate of so many psychotics by and large. In fact, by the end, plausibility no longer seems to matter. Still, there is everything you would want from a film, and I expect there will be considerable discourse provoked for the existential practitioner.

This Machiavellian tragicomic masterclass is worth your while. It portrays the poetics of the Korean soul in all its sharpness. The South Korean auteur Bong Joon-Ho has embodied the wise imaginative tradition of the East. The mystical time-honoured classic verse from that region, is a beautiful acquired taste. To finish, I would like to provide a versification that might capture something of Bong’s essence:

The blue mountains have no speech;
The running waters have no form,
The clear wind can be had for nothing;
The bright moon has no owner.
Among these, I shall grow old,
Free from illness and worries.

(Kim, 1994: 45)

Gregory M. Westlake

References
Publications and films received for review

The following publications and films have been received for possible review. People who wish to be included in the list of book reviewers for Existential Analysis for these or other publications are requested to e-mail the Book Reviews Editor, Ondine Smulders at smuldersea@outlook.com


**Film releases**

2022 Advertising Rates

Existential Analysis

Journal of The Society for Existential Analysis

Professional journal with a circulation of the membership and also subscriptions to libraries and academic institutions.

Format: A5
Published twice yearly

Rates:
Full page (115mm wide x 180mm high) £88
Half page (115mm wide x 90mm high) £56

Deadline:
1 December for inclusion in the January issue
1 June for inclusion in the July issue

Enquiries to http://existentialanalysis.org.uk/contact-us/

Hermeneutic Circular

The newsletter of The Society for Existential Analysis circulated to the membership

Format: A4
Published: three times yearly: February, June and October

Rates:
Full page (160mm wide x 265mm high) £88
Half page (160mm wide x 127mm high) £56
Quarter page (75mm width x 127mm high) £34

Deadline:
20th February for inclusion in the April issue
20th August for inclusion in the October issue

Enquiries to http://existentialanalysis.org.uk/contact-us/
We are delighted to announce the gestation of an exciting new adventure:
INTERNATIONAL CERTIFIED TRAINING in EXISTENTIAL PRACTICE for PROFESSIONALS

The modules below will count as credits towards the ICTEPP or can also be used for CPD hours

**EXISTENTIAL DIALOGUES**

between
Prof Ernesto Spinelli
and the following guests:
Dr Manu Bazzano,
Dr Katerina Zynnis,
Dr Todd Dubose,
Michael Montgomery,
Dr Yaqui Martinez, Dr Alison Strasser,
Dr Betty Cannon, Dr Greg Madison,
Dr Xuefu Wang and Dr Ken Bradford.

Dates: 22 Jan, 19 Feb, 19 Mar, 23 Apr, 21 May, 18 Jun, 23 Jul, 15 Oct, 19 Nov and 17 Dec 2022

Experiential Study Group (includes Existential Dialogues £600 - Saturdays 10am to 1pm (UK time)
Existential Dialogues £300 - Saturdays 10am to 11am (UK time)

Venue: Online Zoom

**ADVANCED SUPERVISION GROUPS**

ADVANCED EXISTENTIAL SUPERVISION GROUP

with Prof Ernesto Spinelli

These Master Workshops provide the opportunity to ‘look again’ at our practice and re-view assumptions and expectations regarding being a therapist

Ten Saturdays from 2pm to 5pm (UK time)
22 Jan, 19 Feb, 19 Mar, 23 Apr, 21 May,
18 Jun, 23 Jul, 15 Oct, 19 Nov and 17 Dec
Fee: £1260 the whole year - ONLINE

ADVANCED AFFECT-BASED SUPERVISION GROUP

with Dr Manu Bazzano

Supervision is not ‘management’ but open exploration. At the heart of group supervision is the crucial notion of affect, the modification or variation produced in a body/mind by the interaction with other bodies/minds.

Ten Saturdays from 2pm to 5pm (UK time)
15 Jan, 12 Feb, 12 March, 14 May, 11 June,
16 July, 17 Sept, 22 Oct, 12 Nov and 10 Dec
Fee: £1260 the whole year - ONLINE

**UNLOCKING OURSELVES for practitioners**

A practitioner needs nourishment, inspiration and a safe place to feel held!

Following the 12 steps of the Heroe’s Journey, this course explores a different methodology every week

What participants said about it:
“Supportive, thought-provoking, emancipating, grounding”
“An eye-opening experience which made me reflect more on myself and learn self care”
“A restorative reflection and authentic human connection to both ourselves and other members of the group”

Thursdays 12pm to 1pm on Zoom
12 weeks £200, drop-ins £20

OPEN FOR BOOKINGS - FIRST COME, FIRST SERVED - ONLINE
BOOK BY EMAIL: admin@therapyharleystreet.co.uk

---

372

*Existential Analysis: Journal of The Society for Existential Analysis*
NSPC OFFERS SPECIALIST, FLEXIBLE POSTGRADUATE TRAINING IN A WIDE RANGE OF MENTAL HEALTH TOPICS AT THE EXISTENTIAL ACADEMY

THE HOME OF EXISTENTIAL TRAINING

- MA EXISTENTIAL COACHING
- MA EXISTENTIAL AND HUMANIST PASTORAL CARE
- MA WORKING WITH DIVERSITY
- MSc AUTISM AND RELATED NEURODEVELOPMENTAL CONDITIONS
- MSc PSYCHOTHERAPY STUDIES
- DProf EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOTHERAPY AND COUNSELLING
- DCPsych COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

WWW.NSPC.ORG.UK

NEW SCHOOL OF PSYCHOTHERAPY AND COUNSELLING
61–63 Fortune Green Road  London  NW6 1DR
☎ 0207 435 8067  // 0203 515 0223  ✉ admissions@nspc.org.uk  ✉ nspc.org.uk
The B.GJ is a twice-yearly journal dedicated to supporting Gestalt therapy and its related applications. It has been published since 1991 and enjoys a high reputation in the Gestalt field internationally.

Journal themes have addressed Gestalt and Spirituality, Gestalt in Education, Gestalt and Groups, Gestalt in Organisations as well as extensive investigation of Gestalt as a form of psychotherapy. Topics have included discussion of narcissism, race, shame, gay and lesbian issues, relation to self-psychology, bodywork with children, the work of Gestalt organisational consultants, and group therapy.

Besides advances in clinical practice, B.GJ articles include leading edge theory, and holistic and field informed research. Challenging and stimulating international debate is enacted in our ‘Letters to the Editor’ section and book reviews appear regularly.

The B.GJ has a wide appeal to the Gestalt community, and is also widely recognised by humanistic, transpersonal, postmodern and existential practitioners, along with organisational consultants and qualitative researchers.

Visit our website to subscribe to printed, digital or combined subscriptions, purchase back copies, submit articles and receive our newsletter.

editor@britishgestaltjournal.com
www.britishgestaltjournal.com
@Editor_BGJ
Membership of the Society for Existential Analysis

The Journal of the Society for Existential Analysis is subscribed to by over 390 practitioners and trainees in the field. Membership is open to anyone who has an interest in the field of existentialism and phenomenology, and includes psychotherapists, counsellors, philosophers, psychologists, psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, students and trainees. Members receive two journals and three newsletters each year, reduced price admission to SEA events and reduced price publications.

Current Membership Rates  

please tick

Standard rate for UK residents  £50.00 [  ]
International rate  £60.00 [  ]
UK student  £35.00 [  ]

(proof required in form of college and course; not available to overseas students)

College & Course:  

For your added convenience, you can now purchase membership online at www.existentialanalysis.org.uk using Visa, Mastercard or any UK debit card.

We regret we are unable to cash cheques from non-UK banks.

Membership Application Form

Name:  

Address:  

City:  

County/State:  

Post/Zip Code:  

Country:  

Home Phone:  

E-mail:  

Please enter the required information. Enclose the form with your cheque and send to: The Membership Secretary, 25 Robsart Street, Flat 32, London SW9 0FA
Information for Contributors

Prospective contributors should send papers or reviews, in English, by email attachment to The Editors, c/o Andrew Miller to submissions.ea@gmail.com

The Editors may alter manuscripts wherever necessary to ensure they conform to the stylistic and bibliographical conventions of the Journal.

Papers must:

- not normally exceed 5,000 words. Longer papers that make a significant new contribution to the understanding of existential practice will occasionally also be considered for publication;
- include a separate title page bearing the title of the paper and name(s) of the author(s);
- include an Abstract of no more than 50 words;
- include a list of no more than 8 Key words;
- include a biographical statement of current professional activity of no more than 25 to 30 words;
- contain contact information which will be printed after the biographical statement: a postal address (preferably professional) and a professional email address. No telephone number should be included.
- Unless it is very short, the paper should be organised into sections.

References given in the text should be in author (date) style, i.e. Jones, A.B. (1989). Single quotation marks should be used except where there is a quotation within another. Extended quotations should be indented and italicised and fully referenced to include a page number. References will be printed at the end of the article in alphabetical order by author. Citations should be as follows:

**Book:**

**Chapter in a book:**

**Paper in a journal:**

**Translated book:**

Endnotes should be used rather than Footnotes. They should be indicated by superscript numerals at the appropriate places (numbering consecutively). The notes should appear at the end of the paper under the heading ‘Notes’.

Authors should ensure that the submission has been copy edited for correct (UK) English grammar and spelling as Reviewers are not able to take time to make these corrections. They should avoid using italics or exclamation marks for emphasis.

Authors are responsible for the opinions expressed.

All academic papers are subject to anonymous peer review. Apart from the title page the remainder of the manuscript should be free of information identifying the author(s).

Existential Analysis is published twice annually in January and July.

Only corrections of printer’s errors can be allowed in proofs. Authors are therefore asked to send any alterations or additions to the Editors within one month of receiving a letter of acceptance. Authors who are not members of the SEA will receive a complimentary hard copy of *Existential Analysis* for that issue. Authors who are members will receive a complimentary pdf copy of *Existential Analysis* for that issue. Book reviewers will not normally receive a complimentary hard copy of the journal.

Photocopying single copies of articles contained in this journal for the purpose of private study is permissible. For multiple copies and reproduction, permission must be sought from the author(s). Copyright is retained by the author(s). If authors use the same material in subsequent publications, acknowledgement should be given to this journal.

© Copyright Society for Existential Analysis 2021   ISSN 1752-5616
The Society for Existential Analysis

The aim of *Existential Analysis*, the journal of The Society for Existential Analysis, is to provide a forum for the expression of views, and the exchange of ideas, amongst those interested in existential-phenomenological analysis and its application to therapeutic practice and everyday life.

**Existential Analysis 32.2 July 2021**

Journal of The Society for Existential Analysis

ISSN 1752-5616

---

**A Box of Darkness: Transforming the experience of existential loss**
Chris Goto-Jones

**A Discussion of Workplace Bullying: Its impact on the sense of self from an existential phenomenological perspective, and implications for existential clinical practice**
Maria Galani

**The Importance of Existential Courage in Experiencing Boundary Situations**
Rafał Miętkiewicz

**Taking HIV Out of the Equation? A phenomenological exploration of a small group of gay men’s meaning making around sexuality whilst on PrEP**
Phoebus Ebbini & Neil Lamont

**The Eight Tensions Framework: An existential-phenomenological analysis of the tensions of undergraduate life**
Natalie Lancer & Virginia Eatough

**A Year of the Pandemic: Existential themes for psychotherapists**
Claire Spiller

**An Exploration of Some Connections Between Existentialism, Education and Psychotherapy Teaching**
Martin Adams

**What Does It Mean to ‘Teach Existentially’, and How Can We Teach Existentialism Existentially**
Simon du Plock, Martin Adams & Rosemary Lodge

**‘Schizophrenia’ in the Echo Chamber**
Rachel Noar

**Working With Power in Existential Therapy**
Paul Overend

**De-colonising My Trans Body: Fanon and the masks I have worn**
Daniel Benjamin Jones

**THINKING ALOUD: Bad Faith: Inequality and discrimination within UK healthcare regulation**
Dominic Macqueen

**Book Reviews**