

Existential Psychology: How does it Influence Wilderness Therapy?

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Abstract:

A key assumption of Existential Psychology is that people have the capacity to shape their destinies by taking control of the choices in their lives. Wilderness therapy programs (WTPs) regard freedom of choice as a pivotal ingredient in facilitating personal change. Clients are equally free to choose both the level of challenge at which they participate and the degree of responsibility they assume in decision-making processes.

Despite this, there are moments on WTPs when choice is clearly restricted. For the participant trekking wearily to reach a campsite before nightfall, the choice of alternatives appear limited. Issues of survival, safety and comfort dictate that persevering in reaching the campsite is a wiser alternative than an impromptu bivouac on an unsheltered mountainside. The choice available for the client in this situation is restricted to the type of attitude they adopt towards their predicament. This paper explores the influence that Existential Psychology has on the philosophical underpinnings of WTPs. It will contend that the givens of human existence provide the practitioner with a foundation on which to base their model of practice.

Introduction

A decade of wilderness therapy practice has paved the way to construct a philosophical foundation for my work with clients. Surprisingly the content has arisen not from the fields of wilderness therapy literature but has been derived from mainstream psychology and psychotherapy. Whilst it is clear that no single school of thought dominates our wilderness models, it is from within Existential Psychology that I have found principles that clearly fit with my model of practice.

The concept of self-determination with its emphasis on shaping human destiny and our innate need to create a meaningful existence resonates deeply with wilderness therapy practice. Other schools of psychology such as orthodox psychoanalysis and radical behaviourism reject the significance of self in shaping our lives (Corey, 1996). For example the Freudian view of human nature maintains that our thoughts, feelings and behaviour are determined entirely by unconscious motivations and instinctual drives. From the classical behaviourism perspective, comes the argument that our motivation for learning is not innate and thus our existence is shaped as a response to environmental stimuli (Skinner, 1971).

History of Existential Psychology

In the 1950's the humanistic movement emerged as a new force in psychology with the themes of self-determination and meaningfulness as the centrepiece (O'Hara, 2005). Drawn from the European philosophy of existentialism, self-determination emphasises the freedom individuals

have in exercising choice to manage their circumstances in spite of external forces that challenge this capability (Yalom, 1989). Grounded in the approach subsequently known as Existential Psychology, is the belief that we are authors of our lives and we draw up the blueprints for its design (Corey 1996). Finding meaning for what we are uncertain about is a view substantiated by Carl Jung (1959). Jung, clearly no existential advocate, argues that we constantly try to interpret and assign meaning to all we fail to understand in the world.

Victor Frankl (1959) believes that we have choices in any given situation even when great suffering and misery are involved. Frankl, who was imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps between 1942 and 1945, cites Nietzsche who maintains that the individual who has a reason for living can bear almost any situation forced upon them (Boeree, 2005). Existential Psychology conveys that we are not the victims of circumstance but instead we are largely what we choose to be (Corey, 1996). Corey argues that choice brings with it the responsibility to live out our potential and that courage is required to face the suffering and uncertainty that accompanies change.

Existential Theory and Other Schools of Psychology

Despite the contrary views of existential theory to those of other schools of psychology (O'Hara, 2005), some contemporary theorists highlight the significance of self-determination and meaningfulness in the shaping of the person. Psychoanalytic forefather Carl Jung (1959) writes that mankind woke up in a world lacking meaning and therefore is constantly striving to interpret events. Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson acknowledges that Freud's theory of the psyche fails to explain the impact the conscious self has on individual development. Erikson's psychosocial theory argues that the completion of meaningful activities and key developmental tasks are necessary to generate healthy development (Corey, 1996). These support the more pessimistic outlook offered by Frankl (1959), which suggests that often, "the modern person has the means to live by, but often no meaning to live for." For the existential practitioner, the practice has always focused on engaging the client to strive toward uncovering meaning in their lives (de Avila, 1996).

Four Givens of Existence

Existential Psychology is based on the belief that our suffering springs from how we relate to the four existential givens of death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness (Yalom, 1989). These givens of existence are inescapable (de Avila, 1996) and the apparent inevitability of our death is foremost. The finiteness of death defines the parameters for our existence and provides the motivation to pursue a fulfilling existence. Freedom brings with it the responsibility to become aware of the choices we have in shaping our lives. Frankl (1959) writes, "everything can be taken from man but the last of human freedoms and that is to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." The unfolding of abstract thinking during adolescence allows us for the first time to become aware of our aloneness in the world (de Avila,

1996). This newfound sense of self highlights the separation that exists between self and others and though we strive to connect to the other, the realisation occurs that we are doomed to live and die alone (Yalom, 1989). Meaninglessness implies an absence of any obvious purpose to our existence (de Avila, 1996). Jung (1959) argues that nothing in life holds any meaning because before mankind existed, events happened, but there was no one there to interpret them. The paradox clearly expressed by these four givens is that we are equipped with a biological immediacy for living life; yet lack any definite meaning as to why we are here.

Wilderness Therapy Programs and Freedom of Choice

Wilderness and adventure therapy programs are defined as therapeutic interventions that utilise activities that are experiential, risk taking and challenging in nature (Crisp, 1999). One of the essential tenets of wilderness therapy is that existential understanding develops through freedom of task choice and challenges, which extend participants to their perceived personal limit (Adams, Denholm & Sveen, 1999). Such programs involve conscious choice and openly stated commitment to engage in healthy risk taking (De Bever & Price, 1999). In some cases, particularly in the early stages of a wilderness program, clients may choose the easy way out of a difficult activity or situation. Yet in other situations, clients have few options other than to commit to the experience because choosing to abandon it appears to have more onerous implications.

Strategic Use of Challenge-by-Choice

Itin (2005) describes one means of confronting clients with their choices. He draws our attention to a potential downside of the challenge-by-choice concept in cases where clients make choices that allow them to back out of tough situations unchallenged. When this behaviour remains unchallenged by the wilderness practitioner, he uses the term “professional enabling” as he maintains it allows clients to persist with old ways of being. Itin suggests an alternative strategy by which wilderness facilitators might empower their clients. By confronting clients with their behaviour and exploring with them the real nature of their choices, the practitioner helps them become aware of the implications of their current choices and encourages them move beyond their old patterns of behaviour.

Limited Choice Bushwalk

A less obvious strategy for confronting clients with their choices is by way of intentionally limiting the choice available to the client. An illustration of this concept of limiting choice is where the practitioner designs a bushwalking route that features significant difficulties towards the end of the hike. During the hike, when group members deliberate on their options, they tend to choose the way forward despite its unknown factors rather than choosing to retrace their steps of the last few days (Adams & Sveen, 2000). Kurt Hahn supports the approach of subtle coercion stating that the one essential component in our role as educators is to urge participants into value forming experiences (Itin, 2005).

The limited choice bushwalk fails to allow participants to back away from commitment and is an example of an activity that reduces the risk of professional enabling and relapse by individuals into old patterns of being. It impels participants to find the courage to step into the unknown and face their anxieties about change. The assumption made by the group is that going forward in spite of the uncertainty is on face value an easier option than retreating. Retracing their steps is not considered a real option because the group have mastered all the difficulties up to this point (Bandura, 1969) and thus feel confident about their chances of success. The group believe emphatically that they have made the choice to proceed solely on their own initiative, yet it would seem otherwise. The group's confident attitude, the ease of their experience to this point and their assumption about the way ahead have all conspired to subtly coerce them into taking this course of action.

Attitudinal Choice

On one hand, the choice available to this group is limited, yet on the other hand considerable scope exists in how they choose to confront the situation. As the group navigates deeper into unknown territory, fear and anxiety become elevated and opportunities for conflict arise as the situation stretches the resources of each group member. They discover that backing out now is no longer an option at almost the same moment that they realise the full extent of their predicament. It is simply a choice of attitude that prevails. Either they choose to pool their resources to counter the tough environment ahead or they disintegrate into conflict and disunity. The issues of survival and safety for the group tend to constrain emotional outbursts from gathering momentum since it becomes abundantly clear that this is a futile strategy. Group members use their energy to support one another and the uncertainty of the external environment further encourages them to pull together and rationally deal with solving the issue of reaching their destination.

The limited choice bushwalk provides a metaphor for the participant that symbolises that each of them have choices in life, which they have not acted upon through fear and ignorance (Corey, 1996). Anxiety was at the crux of this group's experience when they chose to move beyond known territory into the realms of the unknown. The only means of escaping this anxiety is by not venturing (May, 1981). The following is a description of a wilderness program and a group whose experience resembled that of a limited choice bushwalk (Project Hahn, 2000a).

The turning point for the group came on the second day of the bushwalk where the group met its greatest challenge. Conflict reared its head before we had even left [that morning]. There was heated debate about continuing on with the planned route. It came close to the group making a decision to turn back. Eventually the decision was made to push on with the original plan and this decision was the undoubtedly the most crucial one the group made. As a result they experienced a day of emotional and physical hardship, which ended in the dark well after 8pm.

There was rain, leeches, mud, snow and endless walking to contend with and it pushed everyone beyond their limits. Both laughter and tears came and went and the group oscillated between hope and despair of ever reaching the campsite at Wurragurra Creek. The group made it despite all this and were brought together emotionally due to it. They felt quite rightly that they had survived an ordeal.

One participant described his observations about the tension in the group, “emotional conflict sometimes brings people closer together” and as a consequence “I’ve learned that I am closer to this group than any other I have been in.” In regards to his possibilities for the future, this participant commented, “I can pull through anything pretty much now” and as to the personal suffering he endured on the bushwalk, “I don’t think I am smiling on the outside but I am smiling on the inside.” (Project Hahn, 2000b).

Non-directive Facilitation

Professional enabling can be the result of either a dominant leadership style or unintentional assistance given by the wilderness facilitator. Common to several humanist approaches including existential therapy are the goals of fostering independence and promoting empowerment (Adams & Sveen, 2000). For the wilderness practitioner, using non-directive strategies gives the client the control of making their own choices [and mistakes] and finding their own solutions (Handley, 1999).

Lucy’s Choice

An illustration of non-directive facilitation in action is this story of Lucy’s choice. Lucy was introduced in a previous article (Adams & Sveen, 2000), however in this paper we explore her story to establish the relationship between non-directive facilitation, suffering and self-determining behaviour. Lucy is a sixteen year old with a learning difficulty and is participating in a wilderness program. Her goal for the program is to make decisions independently of others that affect her well-being. At one point, Lucy is walking through an overgrown scrubby section of track that is scratching her legs. As a result keeping up with the group is becoming harder and she calls out to the group to wait. She considers the option of getting her overpants out of her pack and putting them on. She decides to ask the facilitator for advice. This is the first time she has been assertive enough to ask the group to wait and sensing that there is some urgency within the group to get going, the facilitator adopts a non-directive approach and deflects the question back at Lucy to see what happens. After a while Lucy seems to be moving toward some type of resolution. She has made a decision to don her overpants and subsequently is able to keep pace with the group without scratching her legs any further. Later on when asked how she came up with the answer and what difference it had made she replied, "I had no choice, I had to make a decision. The difference is that I now know that I am capable of making decisions when I have to." Having asked her what happens in similar situations back at home when she did have a

choice she answered, "I get flustered and someone usually my mum makes the decision for me. I just have to figure out now how I am going to stop her".

Limited choice appears to be working quite effectively for Lucy in this instance, however the driving force behind her decisiveness is in part due to the suffering she is experiencing. Frankl (1959) suggests that what people actually need in life is not some tensionless state as psychoanalysis suggests, but rather that a certain degree of tension is necessary when striving towards goals of relevance (Boeree, 2005). The tension Lucy experiences is the result of her tussle between several factors; her indecisive behaviour, a deliberate lack of assistance by the facilitator and her need to take responsibility for her predicament. The task of the existential aligned practitioner is to help Lucy recognise how she has allowed others to make decisions for her (Corey, 1996) and encourage her to engage in behaviour that reclaims her sense of personal agency (Yalom, 1997). Lucy's goal to make decisions independently of others clearly sought to build a meaningful connection to self-determining behaviours. Did Lucy recognise the connection between her suffering during the bushwalk and the newfound awareness of the possibilities in her life? Her comments suggest so, though it was never determined how she fared on returning home. Frankl (1959) states categorically that without suffering and death, life cannot be complete. An unmistakable connection therefore exists between suffering and meaningfulness. Boeree (2005) suggests that for prisoners in the Nazi concentration camps, those who held onto a vision of their future were the most likely to survive their suffering.

The Significance of Death

In a review of Existential Time-Limited Therapy by Freddie and Alison Strasser, Mike Harding (1999), relates the story of a novelist who as a young man was informed he had but six months to live. As he lived well into his eighties, this was a mis-diagnosis of major proportions. However the initial news sent him into a writing frenzy and he completed four novels within a year. Death framed within such finite parameters ensures that our priorities are fewer and more sharply defined (Rowe, 1992). The line of reasoning proposed in the Strasser's approach is that determining a limit on a client's time in therapy evokes the possibility of powerful encounters occurring in the time allocated (Harding, 1999). For the therapist the metaphor of death places finiteness at the centre of their relationship with clients, committing both to meaningful experiences before their time together is over. The inevitability of death infiltrates wilderness therapy by demanding that clients see the 'death' of the wilderness experience is inevitable also. Wilderness practitioners are required to divide their time between encouraging the participant to engage fully in the possibilities of the moment and preparing the group for their imminent loss.

Program Finiteness

For the practitioner, framing up the finiteness of the program is essential if they are going to prepare group members for the possibilities associated with this loss. A statement such as, "this time on Thursday it will be all over and this group will cease to be," introduces the idea of time-

limited possibilities. Goal setting arises from this concept, urging participants to ask themselves what meaningful things do they want to achieve in the time available. A report written about a wilderness program for African refugees made this observation, “members [of this group] focused on the present [regarding] each moment as precious” (Project Hahn, 2005). A probable cause of the ‘now’ focus for this group, is that during the civil wars in their respective countries many of these individuals witnessed the violent and sudden death of family members (Salopek, 2003). The ever-present spectre of death encourages those who witness traumatic loss to focus heavily on the possibilities of the present moment. As Frankl (1959) states of his experience in the Nazi death camps, “Regarding our provisional existence as unreal was in itself an important factor in causing prisoners to lose hold on life; everything in a way became pointless.” If as (Rowe, 1992) suggests, all we ever experience is a life time of moments in the here and now then the wilderness practitioner clearly has a duty to urge their participants to pay attention to the possibilities offered by focusing on the here and now.

Facilitating for Post-Program Loss

The other responsibility of the wilderness facilitator is to prepare group members for re-entry to their communities. Grief counsellors know implicitly that resolving loss is easier if the person experiencing it has had time to prepare for it and is positive and robust in nature (Glassock & Gresson, 1992). It is hardly surprising that access to a support network of peers or a professional counsellor is a protective factor in dealing effectively with feelings of loss. In some cases participants return to their community in the aftermath of the wilderness program without this support and are subsequently placed at risk of severe post-course loss. However, clients who are referred through collaborative ventures between wilderness therapy outfits and agencies such as substance rehabilitation programs are better equipped to cope with this phenomenon on the basis that follow-up and outreach support can be guaranteed for clients at the end of the wilderness component (Adams, 2001). The participation in the wilderness program by a counsellor from the rehabilitation agency further reduces negative re-entry responses by providing the agency with first-hand knowledge of participants’ experiences. Sharing a wilderness journey with a client is undoubtedly a powerful experience for the counsellor in this instance, for when they take their professional ‘hat’ off and share their fears and anxieties with other participants; they connect to the group in an authentic way (Adams, 2000).

Despite the best efforts by wilderness practitioners to mitigate the feelings of loss experienced by participants, refusal to accept that the program has ended can sometimes precipitate setbacks. One such participant discharged himself from his rehabilitation program the same night he returned from a wilderness program (Adams, 2000). What was essentially a major life decision, compounded his sense of loss significantly (Glassock & Gresson, 1992) and subsequently he spent much time trying to relive his wilderness experience by going back up the mountain where the program had been based. In hindsight he agreed that staying on at the rehabilitation centre for few extra nights would have allowed him to make better use of its support network. It seems that

in spite of the wilderness practitioner's best efforts to flag the idea of 'brief intervention' as a clue to the group's brief time together (Harding, 1999), some participants on wilderness programs will always struggle to let the experience go. For many participants, their experiences on the wilderness program are ones of extraordinary significance. Hidden behind a comment such as this, "I love it out here, it's beautiful and the consequences are better" (Project Hahn, 2000c), is a warning for the practitioner that the client may be reluctant to accept the inevitable 'death' of the wilderness experience and find the will to let it go.

Conclusion

Existential Psychology has its roots planted squarely in the world of philosophical thought (de Avila, 1996) and critics of the approach decry its lack of empirical validation (Corey, 1996). Despite this censoring tone, Existential Psychology tackles the principle human concern of inner emptiness in a direct and formidable way, which few other modalities dare to attempt. Abraham Maslow, equally criticised for his lack of validation, argues that it is vital for practitioners of all theoretical persuasions to look closely at the principles of Existential Psychology. He believes that they offer psychology an underlying philosophy, it currently lacks (May, 1961).

While not rejecting the contributions other schools of psychology have made to my personal model of practice, I have found in the existential approach an exciting philosophical grounding for working with people in the wilderness milieu. The existential concerns of death, freedom of choice, isolation and meaninglessness (Yalom, 1996), offer me a tangible framework from where I can address the core struggles of the client in a real and meaningful way. While it might appear that adolescents have little in common with these existential givens, I would argue that amongst all the populations with whom I have worked, it is with this client group that these principles most strongly resonate.

To cite Sartre (1971) "we are our choices," and we accept responsibility for the results of these choices. For the participant engaged in the wilderness experience, the suffering and anxiety that is integral to the activity is the key to shaping new ways of being. When things get tough during the program and the choice to back out is withdrawn, then the only option for the client is to venture forth with courage to face the uncertainties ahead. In the midst of the stress and intensity of the moment, the participant is required to throw everything into the experience and the way they approach this uncertainty is a test as to whether their choice of attitude will help them prevail. One participant sums up their choice of attitude with this metaphor, "In order to get through the mud you have to tread in it - in life you can't avoid it because where ever you step there is going to be crap," (Project Hahn, 2000d).

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