EXISTENTIAL AND INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGIES

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Properly understood, existential and individual psychologies show remarkable similarities. But there are important differences as well. Clear appreciation of these similarities and differences is instructive for professionals in their theorizing, practice, and research functions, and also for lay persons as they reflect upon the human condition or consider choosing a psychotherapist.

In order to appreciate these two positions, it is necessary to distill their essential characteristics from varying individual interpretations. This is especially difficult to do because of the general trend toward eclecticism in practice that seems to have overtaken psychotherapists who still somehow claim allegiance to particular positions. There is an added difficulty with existential psychology, which has deemphasized systematization to a point where rampant individual interpretation is an understandable result. Also this position has been widely popularized. Despite all these difficulties, progress toward clarity can be made by focusing upon the main concepts that have persisted in each position over time and searching for coherency in the integration of these concepts.

Basic Similarities

Existential psychology derives from a tradition of thought radically different from Freudian psychoanalysis. It is surprising, therefore, that Adler's form of psychoanalysis, individual psychology, should show so many similarities to the existential approach. After all, Adler was for some years a member of the Freudian inner circle and might well have remained influenced by it even after breaking away. But the break with Freud was apparently quite complete.

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Living is Strenuous

Perhaps the most pervasive similarity between the existential and individual approaches concerns conceptualizing living as a difficult, even painful process requiring hard work, discipline, and a sense of personal responsibility. For existential psychology, life is best conceptualized as a *series of decisions* that the person makes (Kobasa & Maddi, 1977; May, 1958). Whatever the variation in content of these decisions, they all have an invariant form: one choice leads to the future (the unknown, the unpredictable) and the other to the past (the familiar, the status quo). Although choosing the future brings *ontological anxiety* (fear that the unpredictable will also turn out to be unfulfilling), it is the way of growth and development. To choose the past is the court *ontological guilt* (the gnawing sense of missed opportunity) which accumulates, should this course be taken regularly, into a settled sense of stagnation, meaninglessness, and despair (Maddi, 1970). At the moment of decision, choosing the future is more difficult than choosing the past because it requires rejection of easy security and comfort and an active acceptance of the awesome responsibility to use one's life to the fullest (Sartre, 1956).

For individual psychology, life is best characterized as the active attempt *to compensate for felt inferiorities* (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). However unpleasant it may feel, experiencing inferiority is not a sign of malady so much as robust health. Attempting to compensate requires a rejection of easy comfort in favor of active striving for difficult, even unattainable goals. Whatever the differences in content between individual and existential psychologies, they share the assumption that when life is led well it is a strenuous, active enterprise.

Creation of Meaning

Existential and individual psychologies are unusual in emphasizing the extreme degree to which persons create meaning by the decisions they make and the actions they take (Binswanger, 1963; Boss, 1963). In the existential approach each decision creates meaning, but there is also an overarching directionality to a life. Called the *fundamental project* (Sartre, 1956), this overarching directionality is also a product of the choices made by the person. It is not really a biological or social given in the sense of a sexual instinct or a social norm. Rather, it is the result of choices that could have been made otherwise, underscoring how meaning is created by persons.

Individual psychology also emphasizes the importance of decisions made by the person in creating the meaning of life. The corresponding concept to the fundamental project is Adler's (1927) *life plan,* which also refers to an overarching directionality. Life plans are constituted of *fictional finalisms* or goals that appear important to the person without any irrefutable objective justification. Thus, in individual psychology also there is little emphasis on biological and social imperatives. Even the inferiorities that activate the push toward perfection are more felt than actual, at least in the later Adler. All in all, the emphasis upon creation of meaning in the process of living qualifies as an important similarity between the two positions under consideration.

Future Orientation

Existential and individual psychologies are similar in rejecting the Freudian assumption that thoughts, feelings, and actions in the present can be best understood as expressions of unresolved conflicts from the past. For Freudians, the particular person one feels attracted to, the activities one finds engaging, the trouble one has in interaction, all work the way they do because they express wishes or fears pertaining to early life in the nuclear family that are for the most part lodged in the unconscious. By this formulation, there is barely a present (just about everything is a transference phenomenon) much less a future.

In existential psychology, the decisions one makes are influenced by one's fundamental project, that generic and unattainable goal off in the future. It is true that the fundamental project was itself formulated out of the early decisions the person made. But it has not yet been achieved and in that sense constitutes a pull toward an as yet unformulated future (Sartre, 1956).

The life plan in individual psychology also constitutes an explanation of present functioning in terms of the future. Like the fundamental project, the life plan is not so easily attained. It is true that behind the life plan stands attempted compensations for felt inferiorities. And it is also true that felt inferiorities must in some sense represent past experiences in the nuclear family (*family atmosphere* and *family constellation*), but on balance the emphasis of individual psychology is on the future rather than the past as an explanation of present behavior (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956).

Developmental Change throughout Life

It is virtually a necessary concomitant of future orientation that emphasis be put on fairly continual change over time organized developmentally in a fashion considered to be growth. One indeed finds this emphasis in both existential and individual psychologies.

In the attempt to realize the fundamental project, persons must change often in a manner that constitutes growing, according to existential psychology. But psychologists subscribing to this position have not been quick to detail and elucidate the developmental implications of their view. Kobasa and Maddi (1977) have recently taken steps to rectify this omission. They distinguish *early* from *later development*. In early development, the person is unformed and hence dependent upon others to help him gain the bases for later, or self-determined development. These bases are (a) the active ability to *symbolize, imagine, and judge* and thereby reinterpret and influence experience, and (b) *courage* to tolerate ontological anxiety and thereby choose the future. These bases result from early experience characterized by (a) a wide range of experience which stimulates symbolization, imagination, and judgement, and (b) limits appreciatively applied by significant others. Once the cognitive abilities and courage mentioned above are present, later development begins. The first stage of later development is *aesthetic* (characterized by self-indulgent revelling in momentary, exploitative excitements); the second is *idealistic* (characterized by a conviction that thoughts, feelings, and actions directly express ideals and should therefore last forever); and the final is *authentic* (characterized by an appreciation of the importance of the future combined with an acceptance of one's limited control over events). These stages of later development are self-determined in the sense that the person progresses from one to the other by failure experiences that disconfirm the eventually discarded stage. If early development has not provided the person with the needed cognitive abilities and courage, then he will not be able to learn by failure and will not progress vigorously through the stages of later development.

Although the emphasis of individual psychology on a life plan implies continual developmental change, there is nothing so specific as the existential statement summarized above. Nonetheless, more than many personality theories, individual psychology emphasizes growth as an expression of vigorous health and the absence of growth as a sign of psychopathology (Adler, 1927). All in all, there is

similarity in emphasis between existential and individual psychologies.

Importance of Consciousness

More than it might seem at first glance, existential and individual psychologies share a conviction as to the importance of consciousness in conducting life. This conviction is an understandable concomitant of the various points of agreement already mentioned.

Freud's uniqueness was his assumption that the real determinants of behavior are unconscious, a position that struck down the Platonic ideal of reason as the architect of the good life. With its emphasis on personal decision-making, responsibility, and the creation of meaning, existential psychology is sharply opposed to the Freudian view and much more in keeping with the Western tradition. In the existential view, the higher the level of consciousness concerning the personal formulation of life through decision-making, the more developmentally mature is the person (Kobasa & Maddi, 1977). This is not to say that any given person will be aware of everything there is to know about himself and his world. But what he is not aware of remains to be formulated in an organized and coherent fashion. He may well be conscious of several seemingly discrete themes in his life that really represent related aspects of the attempt to achieve a particular fundamental project. Perhaps he will not become aware of the interrelationships among these themes until sufficient time and experience accumulate for him to fully appreciate his overall direction. But his unawareness has nothing to do with the operation of defenses to force something once appreciated out of consciousness lest it provoke anxiety. Clearly, radical consciousness is not only possible but very desirable, according to existential psychology.

With its early ties to Freudian psychoanalysis, individual psychology might be expected to show reliance upon the concept of unconscious processes. But as individual psychology evolved it emphasized ever more vigorously consciousness as a major determinant of behavior. One finds little reference to defense mechanisms indicating unconsciousness (e.g., repression) in the writing of Adler and other individual psychologists. There is reliance upon the notion of *safeguarding mechanisms*, but here the reference is to fictional finalisms and life plans that fall short of full, vigorous human potential, rather than to procedures for rendering anxiety-laden, anti-

social impulses unavailable to consciousness (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Also, individual psychology agrees with the existential contention that although concrete behaviors may well be conscious, the overall directionality they express (life plan) may not be fully appreciated at any given moment in time. Individual psychology emphasizes consciousness, and in this emphasis is similar to the existential position.

HUMANISM AND IDEALISM

Outlining the similarities between existential and individual psychologies has also amounted to pinpointing the major dimensions of those positions. That they emerge as radically different from Freudian psychoanalysis is obvious and needs no further elucidation. What does bear further consideration is how existential and individual psychologies compare to other personality theories.

It is useful to follow Maslow's (1962) grouping of personality theories into psychoanalytic, behavioristic, and humanistic ("third force") positions. Existential psychology clearly falls into the humanistic camp, as does individual psychology.

As I have pointed out elsewhere (Maddi, 1976), however, the humanistic category is too loosely defined, actually including two quite different approaches. The one approach is properly called humanistic in that it emphasizes the tendency to actualize inherent potentialities. Such theories (e.g., Rogers, Maslow) emphasize a set of inherent potentialities determining what each person's life should most naturally be and consider movement toward actualizing these potentialities to happen easily, almost automatically, if only society and others have given the person general support and approval.

The other approach should really be called idealistic rather than humanistic. It emphasizes a set of ideals that characterize the good life for everyone without making any reference to individualistic inherent potentialities. Also, it regards movement toward these ideals to be difficult, requiring self-discipline and hard work. Both existential and individual psychologies are of this type. In the existential view, the good life involves creating meaning through decision-making, assuming personal responsibility for one's life, and relinquishing easy comfort and security in order to face ontological anxiety and achieve individuality. In the Adlerian view, a keenly appreciated sense of inferiority is the touchstone to compensatory efforts to perfect oneself and one's society through effort and com-

mitment. There is no emphasis in either position on inherent potentialities automatically actualized if one will only lose one's socially-imposed restrictions and inhibitions. Humanism and idealism are conceptually different enough that it is time to distinguish them among "third force" approaches.

BASIC DIFFERENCES

Within the dimensions of similarity identified, the two positions differ both in content and in degree to which the dimensions are emphasized. There are two differences in particular that appear fundamental, having broad implications for the manner in which many aspects of personality and behavior are conceived.

Existential psychology emphasizes the role of personal choice more than does individual psychology. A convenient way to pinpoint the difference concerns the Adlerian emphasis upon inferiority as the basis of compensatory effort. All persons are assumed to experience some sense of inferiority and engage in some compensatory effort, regardless of differences in the content of their experience and thought (Adler, 1927). In the existential view feeling inferior is taken to indicate a decision that has been made, not a given of human nature. All that bespeaks human nature for existential psychology is decision-making capability and the future or past orientation associated with it (Sartre, 1956).

It may seem as if existential psychology puts greater emphasis on individual freedom, and this is indeed a reasonable way to think as long as one does not thereby slip into the belief that this approach is uninterested in or incapable of formulating systematic explanations of behavior. It is true that the initial choice made by a person is regarded as free in the sense of being undetermined. But as soon as the choice is made, it has consequences, e.g., others respond to the person in particular ways, certain alternatives are no longer available, and the person may begin to think of himself in particular ways. Assuming responsibility for the choice amounts to accepting the definition of self that ensues from it. Thus, it would seem that existential psychology accepts behavioral determination in something like the usual sense.

The other fundamental difference between the existential and individual psychologies concerns what kind of goal-directed behavior is considered ideal. In order to appreciate the difference, the con-

cepts of life plan and fundamental project must be considered further.

The life plan as conceptualized by Adlerians is more concrete and conventionally-defined than is the fundamental project of existentialists. Typically, the life plan includes the performance of socially-recognized and valued goals (Adler, 1927). This is understandable, as goals represent compensations for felt inferiorities, which may, in turn, be experienced largely as social comparisons having their prototypes in family constellation and atmosphere. Because the felt inferiorities are considered both universal and developmentally valuable, there would be no reason for an Adlerian to regard dedication to fulfilling social roles as a handicap. If a psychotherapy client developed the goal of being an excellent physician, the Adlerian therapist would certainly help him understand the relationship of inferiority feelings to this goal but probably would not encourage doubting its value.

In contrast, a fundamental project considered developmentally valuable by existential psychologists would be much more difficult to specify in the language of social roles. If a person dedicated himself completely to becoming an excellent physician, never doubting that his life should be used this way, that would probably be considered inauthentic by an existential psychotherapist because the goal would have a developmentally narrowing effect, i.e., too many other experiential possibilities would have to be relinquished (Sartre, 1956). And if the therapist were to find felt inferiorities at the basis of this goal, he would be all the more convinced that the life trajectory was developmentally stifling, given that this state of affairs would be regarded as the result of choice rather than a universal human characteristic. A fundamental project regarded as developmentally valuable would be generic rather than concrete, individualistic rather than defined by social roles, and consistent with an ever-widening sphere of experience rather than limiting specialization. Further, an existential psychotherapist would encourage his client to engage in fairly regular doubt and reconsideration of these goals. If meaning in life is created by the choices one makes, then no choice is forever and should be scrutinized regularly.

Needless to say, the two differences just discussed are related. For existentialists, if there is nothing universal but the decision-making capability; then the goals that are justifiable are specifically those which least impede decision-making. Generic and individualis-

tic goals increase the occasions for decision-making and are therefore to be valued. Concrete, conventionally-defined goals limit the occasions for decision-making, encouraging routine actions and conventional meanings, and are therefore not to be valued. For Adlerians, if felt inferiorities are universal and conditioned socially, then goals couched in terms of socially-defined roles are to be valued as compensatory efforts.

From this analysis, existential psychology emerges as more concerned with the developmental value of behavioral variability, doubt, exploratory efforts, and a sense of personal responsibility for one's life than does individual psychology. For its part, individual psychology emphasizes more dedication to the pursuit of socially-sanctioned roles and behavioral stability.

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