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# A moment to pause and reflect on the significance of the existential paradigm for counselling psychology

Edith Steffen & Terry Hanley

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**Content & Focus:** *In introducing this Special Edition on Existential Approaches and Issues in Counselling Psychology this Editorial invites readers to pause and reflect on the significance of the existential paradigm for counselling psychology. Starting with a reflection on heightened existential awareness during a moment of perceived significance and purpose, the Editorial explores different contributions the existential paradigm has made to counselling psychology, particularly in the UK, where the British school of existential psychotherapy has had a major influence on the profession. It briefly describes the idea of ‘existential sensibility’ as a trans-theoretical attitude that can be applied across different therapeutic contexts and models and notes the impact phenomenological research methodologies have had on the discipline. Finally, it considers the increased presence of a stand-alone existential orientation for counselling psychologists and invites readers to continue fruitful dialogues between the existential paradigm and the discipline of counselling psychology overall, both in a UK context and on an international scale.*

**Keywords:** *British school of existential psychotherapy; existential counselling psychology; existential-phenomenological paradigm; integration; phenomenology; pluralism.*

WHEN BOB GELDOF performed *I Don't Like Mondays* with the Boomtown Rats at Live Aid in 1985, and as the song came to the line ‘*And the lesson today is how to die*’, the music stopped for a minute, and everything stood still; millions of people around the world were jolted into unexpected reflection – a pregnant moment about which Geldof (1987) later wrote in his autobiography that it felt to him as if his entire life had been leading up to that moment. I (Edith) remember how it impressed itself on my mind, this idea that a moment can feel as if all of one's life becomes one of meaning and purpose. Of course, in a way every moment of our life is the moment all of our life has been leading up to, and it is one of our human malaises that we let millions of moments slip by unfelt, unacknowledged, unreflected and unshared. From an existential perspective, we may call this ‘inauthentic’ or ‘bad faith’, a state of unconsciousness or hibernation,

and it is existential awareness that can lead us to face the moment and meet, as Emmy van Deurzen (2010) has called it, ‘the challenge of living with one's eyes wide open’ and to embrace whatever choices this offers to us. As Van Deurzen observed ‘[f]or it is in rising to our most difficult challenges that our blood starts to run freely in our veins again and that we become awake again’ (p.248). This can then be the starting point for new growth and for accomplishing what gives our life meaning and purpose. The moment Bob Geldof described in his reflections, therefore, had not only to do with the full brutal awareness of a moment to be lived to the full, but it was the moral quality embedded in that moment that made it so rich and meaningful. The lesson was actually one about *how to live*: it was about living purposefully and authentically in accordance with one's deepest and highest values, a truly existential project.

With this in mind, let me seize the moment and proceed to presenting this Special Edition. While I can't compare the moment of introducing this Special Edition on existential approaches and issues with a Geldof kind of moment of significance, in the weeks leading up to writing this Editorial and wondering who on earth I thought I was to take on this role, my mind kept thinking of Live Aid and that someone who arguably wasn't a particularly great musician could actually find himself in the right place at the right time to demand attention and provide a platform for the great and the good in the field to some effect. So while my intention is not to ask rudely for 'your money now' or even more appropriately for your 'freaking' attention, I am using this opportunity to have a drum-banging and bell-ringing moment here, making a space for contemplating the significance of existential perspectives for counselling psychology before handing over to the various expert contributors to this Special Edition.

### **Existential sensibility as a trans-theoretical attitude in counselling psychology practice**

Existential concerns are fundamental to life itself, to each and every one of us, but it could be argued that they take on special significance in a therapeutic setting, for example, when two human beings, client and therapist, meet to work something out that often concerns the very heart of the client's life-world. Attempting to do justice to the client's predicament could be seen to involve taking an attitude towards the client that holds in mind and is sensitive to their existential context, their *thrownness* and *situated freedom*. Such existential sensibility seems relevant across most practice settings and therapeutic models and disciplines. Furthermore, it could be said that an existential-phenomenological perspective is of particular significance for counselling psychology, as it converges with some of our fundamental values. Firstly, there is an emphasis on the client as a *human being*,

which implies a concern with 'the nature of human nature' and thus a particular concern with philosophical questions about what it means to be a human being. Secondly, there is an emphasis on a *contextualised* understanding of the client. This implies not only the socio-political, cultural and historical givens of someone's existence but also their perchedness between birth and death, bodily existence and spiritual meaning-making, their separateness and connectedness and the moral questions and choices that arise every step of the way in the light of the irrevocability of our actions and the finitude of our lifespan.

Approaching the encounter with the client with such an awareness or attitude, therefore, constitutes a trans-theoretical perspective or, as it has been described by Milton et al. (2002) 'a meta-model of human existence' (p.17), which provides an integrative framework and 'has the potential to augment and deepen narrower epistemological frameworks by providing a rich contextual base and soulfulness for understanding the overarching principles of what it is to be human' (p.6). More recently, such a stance has been elaborated as forming a contribution to pluralistic counselling psychology practice, as it can 'strengthen our field's philosophical and ethical stances which attempt to address psychological difficulties as relational rather than medical in nature' (Manafi, 2010, p.172). Engaging counselling psychology's value base within a pluralistic perspective, this stance may take the form of an 'ethic', a 'fundamental 'humanistic/existential' commitment (Cooper & McLeod, 2011, p.17) which links existential awareness with a humanistic attitude that aims 'to respect and validate the Other in the totality of their being' (Cooper, 2009, p.121).

The existential paradigm, therefore, offers something to counselling psychology both in terms of 'non-specific factors' or attitudinal aspects and as an orientation or model in its own right. However, as Ernesto Spinelli seems to indicate (this issue), to reduce the existential paradigm to a 'collec-

tion of themes' (p.8) would do the model gross injustice, and while continuing to point out its potential as a cross-model attitude or stance as in his contributions to the first two editions of the *Handbook of Counselling Psychology* (Spinelli, 1996, 2003), he now seems to particularly emphasise the existential model as a stand-alone approach (for a consideration of the integrative potential of existentialism in counselling psychology, see also Denis O'Hara's response to Spinelli's contribution and other papers in this special issue in the 'Dialogues and Debates' section).

### **Existential-phenomenological inquiry as a questioning stance in research and beyond**

One of the greatest areas of impact that the existential-phenomenological paradigm has had on counselling psychology concerns the influence of phenomenology as a research methodology. The magnitude of this impact could be explained as due to this methodology having reached our discipline via two routes, one route speaking to the 'counselling' part and one to the 'psychology' part. In terms of the counselling route, phenomenological research methods have been a natural port of call for counselling psychologists. 'Bracketing off' one's assumptions and opening to the experience and life-world of the other in order to develop 'an authentic and comprehensive description of the way in which a phenomenon is experienced by a person or group of people' (McLeod, 2003, p.79) is a familiar attitude to practitioners trained in person-centred ways of working and committed to a humanistic value base. As regards the psychology route, phenomenology played a significant role in the opening up of the wider discipline of psychology to qualitative research methodologies and thus became more easily available to counselling psychologists within academic psychology departments from the 1980s/1990s onwards. This formed part of a re-discovery of the value of ideographic research, a renewed focus on subjective

experience and a general 'turn to language' in the wake of emancipatory movements in wider society, which challenged nomothetic positivist approaches to researching the person (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). While some of the more radical phenomenological methods such as Descriptive Phenomenology or Heuristic Inquiry tend to be used only in departments where existential therapy is taught or otherwise plays a prominent role, it is probably fair to say that IPA has become one of the leading methodologies used by counselling psychologists in the UK. Looking at published research in *Counselling Psychology Review* over the past two years (including this issue), IPA and Grounded Theory were the two most frequently-used methodologies (four papers each) followed by Thematic Analysis (two papers). The success of IPA in itself is likely to ensure that a phenomenological attitude continues to be practised – or at least aspired to – across the discipline.

As has been well-elaborated by Spinelli previously (1996, 2003), existential-phenomenological research methodology stands in direct opposition to a natural science perspective on numerous levels, offering a usefulness to counselling psychology which lies in supplying it not only with suitable research methods but also with a critical stance, which, through the suspension of judgement, allows us to engage in the 'questioning of assumed truths, facts and the soundness of inferences that all models adopt' (2003, p.196). This way the existential-phenomenological perspective can serve as a tool that opens up inquiry in diverse ways and across different aspects of our involvements, be that in research or in practice, at discipline or societal level, and last but not least in a reflexive encounter with ourselves.

### **Existential counselling psychology – a British phenomenon?**

The above-mentioned debates around integration and pluralism and around phenomenology versus 'natural science' approaches

to research have been particularly pertinent in a UK context. Here, the influence of existential philosophy on the discipline of counselling psychology has been most apparent as emanating from the British school of existential psychotherapy, which draws heavily on European existentialism and which has had close links with the profession from its beginnings. Key figures such as Emmy van Deurzen and Ernesto Spinelli (both contributors to the present issue) have had a lasting impact on British counselling psychology through their active involvement in the profession as lead practitioners, trainers and writers. As a consequence, an increasing number of UK practitioners now identify as 'existential counselling psychologists', having been trained in existential psychotherapy as their main model of practice, having attained doctoral-level status in counselling psychology and being chartered and registered as practitioner psychologists with the relevant bodies. This new generation of existentially trained counselling psychologists is likely to continue to shape and develop the professional identity of existential counselling psychologists and to extend the fruitful dialogues between the existential paradigm in particular and the discipline of counselling psychology as a whole, which we have been fortunate to enjoy here in the UK. Given the increased efforts towards international co-operation, this influence could also take root more widely. One opportunity may present itself through The First World Congress for Existential Therapy, which is to take place in London in May 2015 and which is likely to offer many further chances for international co-operation and should provide further impetus for existentially interested counselling psychologists to engage with this paradigm (for more information, visit <http://www.existentialpsychotherapy.net/>).

The fact that the existential paradigm has been more influential in counselling psychology this side of the Atlantic is not to suggest that it has been of no significance elsewhere, in particular in the US. There is

no doubt that existential philosophy has had an influence on humanistic psychology (see also du Plock, 2010; Orleans & van Scoyoc, 2009) which can be seen as one of the major roots of counselling psychology on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond. As the discipline of counselling psychology around the world is moving towards closer connectedness at an international level, it will start to review its foundations including its influences and values. This will be a good time for revisiting the contribution of the existential paradigm to counselling psychology and for considering its continued importance for an international discipline that is relevant, responsive, vibrant and ethical.

### **Overview of the Special Edition**

Talking about the relevance and vibrancy of the existential paradigm in the contemporary world, the present issue hopes to be an illustration of this and to inspire further engagement and development. It gives us great pleasure to introduce two invited papers in this Special Edition, one by Ernesto Spinelli, which acts as the opening piece to the issue, and one by Emmy van Deurzen, which brings the main body of articles in this issue to a close. We are most obliged to both these 'legends' of existential psychotherapy for gracing these pages with their thoughtful contributions.

Ernesto Spinelli introduces his opening contribution as a challenge to counselling psychologists, setting out how the existential-phenomenological approach is in his view in conflict with much of what counselling psychology is about, something that we hope will stimulate further response and debate. By contrast, Martin Milton then follows with a theoretical paper which posits that there are many overlaps between counselling psychology and existential-phenomenology and which demonstrates how an existential-phenomenological perspective on sexuality, in particular same-sex sexuality, can benefit counselling psychology. These two thought-provoking papers are followed by two further theoretical articles, the first one written by

Greg Madison, who resonantly provides an explication and demonstration of 'palpable existentialism', an existential-experiential therapy approach based on the philosophy of Eugene Gendlin. The next theoretical paper, authored by Martin Adams, takes an insightful look at lifespan development from an existential counselling psychology perspective. The research portion of the Special Edition then follows with an IPA report by Will Edwards and Martin Milton on older people's experiences of existential therapy in their transition to retirement. Concluding the research section, Emmy van Deurzen's invited contribution then introduces readers to Structural Existential Analysis (SEA), a phenomenological research methodology developed by Van Deurzen, which uses different structures as data analysis heuristics to explore and describe the life-world of research participants. The appearance of this paper in *Counselling Psychology Review* constitutes a significant moment, as this is the first ever published account of this methodology, which meaningfully and usefully extends the

range of available phenomenological methods. The special issue then closes with the Dialogues and Debates section introduced by Denis O'Hara. We hope that readers will find this issue stimulating, thought-provoking and inviting of further engagement.

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