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Investigating the principles of psychotherapy based on comparative analysis of views of existence philosophers

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to inference some principles of psychotherapy based on the investigation and comparative analysis of the ideas of existence philosophers regarding human being and his psyche. The research method used is comparative analysis as well as practical syllogism from the philosophical research methods. As the results indicate, although there are many variations in the ideas of the existence philosophers, all of them focus on similar points in explaining the human essence. With regard to such ground, the psychotherapy principles including self-awareness, freedom and responsibility; search for mean; personality; and authenticity were deduced. The methods for applying and practicing each of the principles by the therapists and the counselors in treating the human psyche are also proposed.

Keywords: Existential psychotherapy, existence philosophy, counseling, principle

1. Introduction

Existence philosophy is one of the new philosophies which originated from the ideas of philosophers like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche during the nineteenth century. This philosophy was later developed by the philosophers such as Heidegger, Jaspers, Marcel, Bubber, and Sartre in the twentieth century.

Based on the views from existence philosophers regarding the nature of human being and his life, an approach has been developed in the field of counseling and psychotherapy which was proposed and expanded by theorists such as May (1958; 1969; 1983) and Yalom (1980); this approach was called as existential psychotherapy. By choosing a different view, these theorists emphasized that on the client and counseling instead of focusing on the psychopath and psychotherapy. In the same line, from the last decades of twentieth century some works have been published on this topic which mainly investigated the scientific approaches for psychotherapy, or in the words of theorists have probed the approaches for counseling (for example see Spinelli, 1989; van Duerzen, 2002; Lander and Nahon, 2005; Schneider, 2007).

But, in the present study the philosophical bases of this approach is investigated through a comparative analysis of views from existence philosophers. This is done with the aim of proposing principles and methods for guiding psychotherapist, who takes the role of a counselor or a teacher in this view. It is worth mentioning that method also

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shows the manner with the difference that the principles are more general guidelines and guidance and the methods are more specific and applicable guidelines that are drawn from principles.

2. Research Questions

Based on what presented above the research questions probed in the present study are as follows:

What are the nature of human being and his life from the view of existence philosophers?

What are the principles and approaches guiding the counselor based on the common ideas of existence philosophers regarding the nature of human being and his life?

3. Methodology

In order to compare and contrast the ideas from existence philosophers with regard to the nature of human being and his life, the content of valid and relevant documents are analyzed qualitatively. There are various methods for qualitative context analysis (Given, 2008), but for the purpose of this study comparative analysis is used. As Rihoux (2006) believes, comparative analysis is a comparison between individuals, discourses (dialogues), predicates, collections, topics, groups, or the eras which aims at revealing the similarities and differences. The main part of comparative analysis is called as “constant comparative analysis”, and as Given (2008) argues: “in the process of constant comparative analysis...through constant separation and comparison of concepts and predicates, expanding conceptual pattern would be possible, and this indicates the relationships between concepts or predicates” (p. 100).

In this study the concepts or predicates explaining the views of existence philosophers regarding human nature and his life, after separation, are compared through the method of constant comparative analysis. This is done in order to provide the possibility of deducing principles and methods for psychotherapy or counseling by using practical syllogism as one of the methods of philosophical inquiry (Haggerson, in Short, 1991, pp. 43-45). In other words, the prescriptions by existence philosophers about the life of human being on the one side, and the knowledge of psychotherapy and counseling on the other side, provide the possibility of deducing principles and methods for psychotherapy and counseling.

4. The nature of human being and his life from the view of existence philosophers

From the past times, philosophers aim at crossing all of the specific and individual characteristics and reaching the truths beyond time and place. From the nineteenth century on, in reaction to such a trend in the history of philosophy some of the philosophers have emphasized connection between thought and deep and real experiences of human life and existence, hence they are referred to as existence philosophers. They believe that the condition of each individual is unique with regard to the situation that surrounds him and any scientific or philosophical system which merely looks for understanding the condition of human being would not manage to illuminate the condition of individual in relation to his real life. For example, in response to the ideas of Hegel, Kierkegaard (1962) for the first time used the word existence to explain the being of human. He believes that human existence is a unique whole and thinking is only one of the powers of existence and it is considered as one of its dimensions, therefore if this dimension be separated from its root which is existence or, in other words, if human existence is limited to thinking, then his life would be devoid of passion and excitement. Jaspers (1956) considers Nietzsche to be in agreement with Kierkegaard because he emphasizes the connection between thinking and human's real life. Jaspers writes: “... [As they believe] the thought of man must be the house in which he lives or it will become perverted” (pp. 25-26). In order to explain the real being of human, Heidegger (1996) also refers to the possibilities such as death, worry, and anxiety which can provide the ground for escaping the routine and ignorance. Marcel's critique on some of prominent philosophers' concern with abstract concepts and their inattention to human condition in real life is also consistent with the presented discussion (Marcel, 1973). From the viewpoint of Sartre (1966) also human's being is prior to his nature essence and since he is a being for itself, who is free and unique, he is capable of creating values and these values engender his nature essence.

Based on the presented points and also as Graic (2000) believes, there are variations in the views of existence philosophers, but all of them emphasize common points in explaining human existence: first, there is no predetermined objective or essence for human, and it is the human who determines his own essence with his

behaviors. Second, human being has free will and none of social or biological elements inhibit this freedom. Through controlling and managing these elements, human being can apply them in his way to freedom; therefore he would be responsible for their consequences. Based on such a ground, some of the principles and methods guiding psychotherapist or counselor are as follows:

4.1. Self-awareness, freedom, and responsibility

Existence philosophers have insisted on the significance of awareness about condition of oneself in the life, which is understanding freedom and following that, responsibility. In this way Kierkegaard (Dru, 1959, p. 77), after describing his own contemporary cultural deviations such as superficiality, abstract and non-passion thinking, and unfamiliarity with silence, considers his own prophecy to be illuminant and calling any one to freedom and breaking out of this situation. Nietzsche (2006) also complains about ignorance and satisfaction of masses with their own conditions. Criticizing the philosophy about being that is preoccupied with abstract concepts, Marcel (Schillp and Hahn, 1991) also believes that the role of philosophy is to consider human existence and his emptiness in the present world such as being, love, and genius; he considers the role of philosopher to be illuminant and awakener. As Sartre (1966) also believes, human's being or in his word "being for itself", is what the human being is not but he wants to be, and in this way human being is free and also aware of this condition. Jaspers (1969) also considers being human as becoming human and considers the role of philosophy as awakening human beings and showing his responsibility.

The consequences of being aware of freedom and responsibility are panic and anxiety. Because, as Kierkegaard also indicates, being aware of various possibilities and human's freedom in selection and also the role of this selection in building his future, brings concern, panic, and anxiety into human life. In this way, not only such panic and anxiety is not undesirable, but it can provide the ground for consciousness and precision in human choices.

Based on the issues discussed, one of the counseling principles which guides counselor is helping client to be aware of their humanistic being, freedom, and their responsibility for this freedom. Regarding this point, and as an example, the client should specifically be helped to accept panic and anxiety as the consequences of awareness of his own human condition and to get along with that, and not to expect a life with constant calmness. To elaborate on the importance of anxiety in human life, May (1983) believes freedom and anxiety to be two sides of a coin; we experience anxiety when we have used our freedom for moving from a familiar world to unfamiliar issues. From another point of view, Van Deurzen (2002) believes that "existential anxiety" is the basis of conscious life. In this regard, as he proposes, the main goal for existential therapy is not to draw a restful and secure life for the clients, but to make them aware of life essence as a perilous event which is followed by existential anxiety as the consequence for this awareness.

4.2. Search for mean

According to the description of human life and the principle of self-awareness, freedom, and responsibility provided by existence philosophers, another principle can be proposed for counseling as "search for mean". It was mentioned that existence philosophers do not accept any predetermined essence for human being and they consider human being to be the creator of his own essence based on the way he takes in the life. For example, from the viewpoint of Kierkegaard (1962) human being is always constructing himself in a unique way, and therefore no individual could be known by using general characteristics of human being. Nietzsche (1961) believes that human being should overcome himself and step beyond himself; Sartre (1966) argues that being is prior to essence; Heidegger (1996) believes that we cannot talk about essence for human being, human being is the existence and Jaspers believes that being human is becoming human. Jaspers emphasizes that although human being is constantly in the situations which are not selected and created by himself but he can accept them and apply them in constructing himself and by doing this he can go beyond them. Accordingly, human being brings meaning into his life based on his own choices. Regarding the principle of searching for mean we can refer to encouraging client to create values. From the viewpoint of existence philosophers, one of the displays of human freedom is questioning conventional values and beliefs, rejecting them and creating new values. This process is explained, particularly by Nietzsche (2006), through criticizing cultural and value deviation of his contemporary people, which means

disparaging the most premier traditional values or nihilism. In his view, nihilism is desirable if it is regarded as an interim level in creating novel values.

As a result, one of the counseling methods is to help clients to question the values which bother their psyche like a heavy burden, and also to help them create values and bring meaning to the life based on their own unique thoughts and beliefs. By the same token, Frankl (1978) believes that there are so many ways for finding meaning through work, love, and even pain and obliging others. According to his view, therapist is not supposed to tell the clients what their specific meaning in life is, but he should encourage them to discover a meaning for their own. Along these lines, exposing clients with questions as “Why am I here? What do I want from life? What is my life goal? And what is the origin of meaning in my life?” could be advantageous.

4.3. *Individuality*

All of the existence philosophers have insisted on individuality and specific, and even unique, personal characteristics of each individual. For example, Kierkegaard (1962) prioritizes human's individuality over human's being; Nietzsche indicates to the fact that human beings are different with each other and each of them is like a “single tree in a desert” (2006). Valuing individuality of Dasein, Heidegger (1996) warns that the role of others may inhibit human's self and individual characteristics. Highlighting concepts like “being for itself”, loneliness, objection, abstinence, and responsibility by Sartre (1966) implies his emphasis on preciousness of individuality. Jaspers (1956) criticizes idealistic and positivistic approaches because both of them disregard individual existence. Finally, supporting the “I-Thou” relationship between human beings, Bubber considers them as bond with humans having meaningful, deep, and unique worlds (Ozman and Craver, 2005).

With respect to the individuality principle, one of the counseling approaches is respecting human's loneliness and differences and introducing the value of such characteristics to the clients. In such counseling, on the one hand, counselor believes that each client has specific experiences which are different from other people; hence he has specific views and beliefs; On the other hand, the client has special and different abilities that can be flourished specifically and differently with others. Therefore, instead of trying to reinforce thoughts and impose particular thinking way and behavior on the clients, the counselor sympathizes with them and tries to understand them and their specific characteristics in order to base his guides and supports on such understanding and acceptance. On this ground, Rogers (1959) talks about empathy; that is the counselor enters client's internal world and experiences his world in the same way that he experiences it, but he should not be lost in that world.

4.4. *Authenticity*

Taking into account the individuality principle is a ground for talking about the preciousness of authenticity or, in other words, becoming oneself and having a life compliant with values that individual has admitted. As existence philosophers believe, the situation of each individual is unique with regard to his circumstances; if the individual thinks and behaves the same as the others in various social and cultural situations, he would not be authentic. Concerning the same point, in criticizing the culture of his contemporary masses Kierkegaard (Prosser & Ward, 2000) refers to deviation of dominant and generally accepted beliefs. Nietzsche in brief but deep indications such as “human being: be yourself” demands human being to be authentic (2003). Heidegger (1996) in describing the manner of human's being mentions some possibilities like death, concern, and anxiety which can provide the ground for getting out of routine and ignorance, thus proving an authentic life for human. Sartre (1966) also considers human's encounter with sentimental and emotional experiences such as panic or anxiety and maintaining them in one's being as the signs of authenticity and write: “human's endeavor to release from panic and anxiety, is his own deception” (p. 681). Criticizing human's inauthentic life, Marcel (1973) points to the role of philosophy for illuminating and warning about this condition. Finally, Jaspers (Graic, 2000) proposes that becoming oneself and transcendence, or in other words human's authentic life, is possible in phrases like “existential communication” and experiencing “boundary situations”. Bubber (Ozman & Craver, 2005) assumes that the authentic relationship between humans is a kind of “I-Thou” relationship versus “I-That” relationship which would be explained in the following as methods for counseling.

From Jaspers (1956) view one of the conditions for being oneself and becoming oneself is communication; communication with others, with humans who have existence, tradition, culture, history, and beyond all

transcendence or God. He begins by emphasizing the role of communication, even in the lowest level as ordinary and experiential life. And in higher levels, he considers one of the goals of education in any society as awakening and keeping the historical soul of society alive in the its individuals through ways like cooperation in everyday life, experience of the manner of talking and personal social interactions with humanistic personality of society members which Jaspers calls “existential communication” (Graic, 2000). As the result, counselor should, on the one hand, gain awareness about his own history, culture, and traditions and, on the other hand, should provide the ground in the clients to communicate with other humans having existence as well as with society’s history, culture, and traditions.

As Jaspers (1963) believes, other necessary condition for authentic life, is experiencing “boundary situations”; the states that human being experiences in the climax of happiness, excitement, and passion, or in the depth of pain, grief, distress, wonder, and suspense. These are experiences like confronting with death, war, defeat, guilt, distress, love, and God’s presence. In such conditions human being understands who he really is and his existence would blossom. In his view, the states that human being experiences in the climax of happiness and excitement are good and due to this we can search for such experiences. Regarding this issue, the prophecy of counselor for his clients is, on the one side, informing about the goodness of these experiences and, on the other side, providing the ground for such experiences. But, it seems that in his beliefs experiences like confronting with death, war, defeat, guilt, and distress which have a painful and distressing face, can also provide the ground for human evolution. Accordingly, although we should not search for such experiences but these experiences occur inevitably, so we should be aware of them and when occurred we should perceive their significance in evolution of our existence and authentic life. In line with the same discussion, May(1983) proposes that the price of denying death is self-alienation and believes that in order to completely understand himself human being should face death and become aware of bodily death. He and also Yalom (1980) stated that being aware of death is the source of our tendency to life and constructiveness. Van Deurzen (2002) also reminds us that earth is a place between heaven and hell; a place with so many pains and joys which has levels of wisdom that could cause the differences.

As a final point, we can indicate to the method of “I- Thou” relationship instead of “I-That” relationship between counselor and client. This kind of relationship, as Bubber interprets, is not a relationship based on knowledge but is based on capability. In the second kind of relationship the counselor regards client the same as any other object which could be known, but in the first type of relationship, the clients is also a human being the same as counselor who has capabilities similar to that of counselor. Bubber calls this type of relationship as authentic and honest and argues that the relationship between me and you is not merely a relationship, but it is the apex of honesty. Only in this situation to see and to be seen, to know and to be known, to love and to be loved are possible simultaneously and together.

5. Summary and Conclusion

The present study aimed at a comparative analysis of existence philosophers’ ideas regarding human essence and life and deducing some principles and approaches guiding counselors in helping their clients. The findings of this study could be summarized in the following figure:

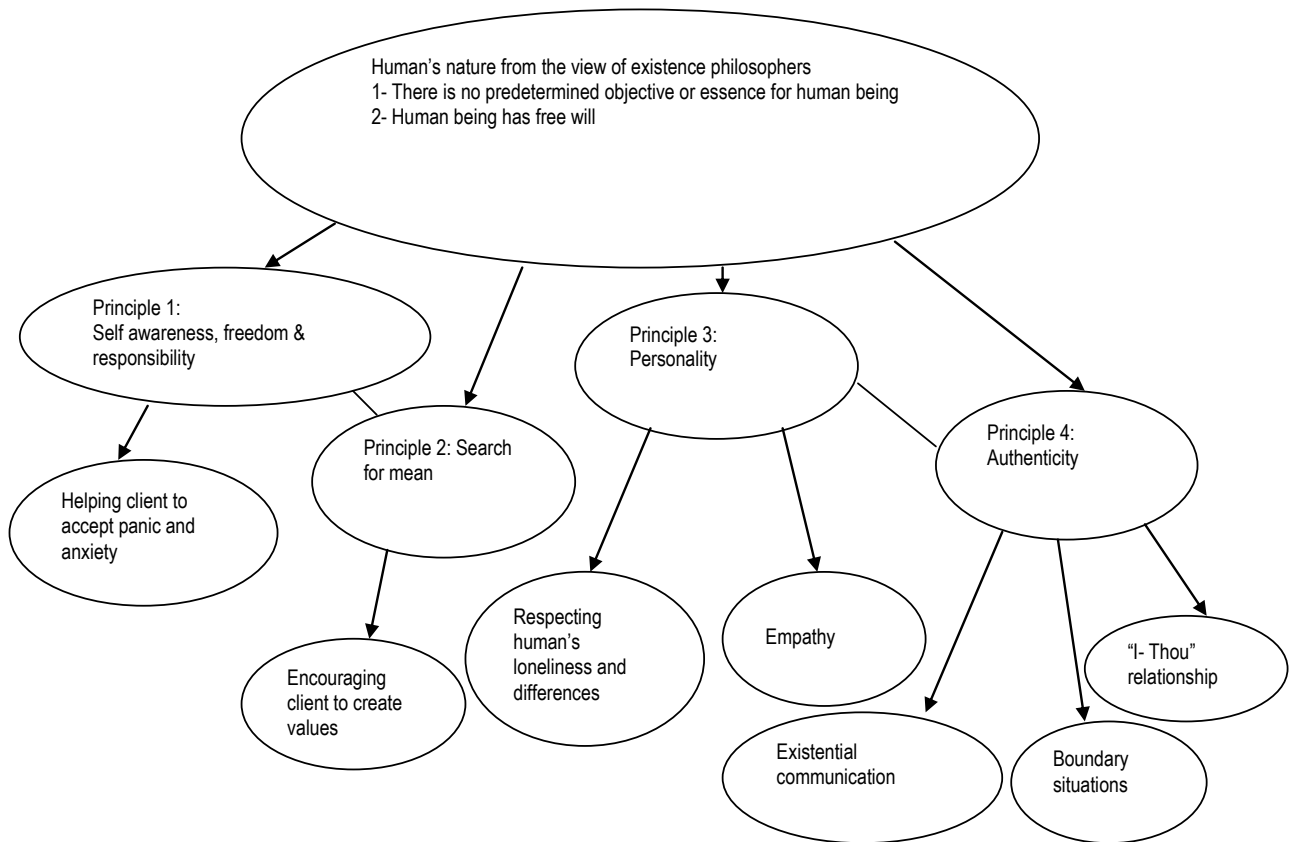


Fig. 1. Foundations, principles and methods of psychotherapy based on the ideas of existence philosophers

Finally, it should be mentioned that instead of constructing a definitive and complete philosophical system, existence philosophers have proposed some views relating to life and its dynamic essence. Therefore, the above figure should also be viewed in the same way and the dynamic, mutual and multi-sided connection and relationship between the recommended principles and approaches should not be overlooked. Due to the emphasis of the present study on the theoretical bases of existential psychotherapy, it is necessary for the future studies to expand the approaches guiding psychotherapist and counselor proposed in this study and to recommend other approaches.

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