

The Importance and Limits of Experiential Psychotherapy

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Abstract: Experiential therapy focuses on emotions - whether we are talking about negative emotions, such as anger, pain, shame - correlated with past experiences, but also emotions associated with success, self-esteem, or even responsibility. Unlocking already experienced emotions and their subjective experience is the central point of experiential therapy - whether we are talking about the experience of the immediate and the awareness of our own being, or we are talking about "frozen" experiences, to which we have no conscious access outside psychotherapeutic practices. It reconfigures our mental maps by generating behaviors that make sense only in correlation with the understanding of those emotions, that are present in the subconscious but of which we are unaware and are not effectively rationalized. The article aims to analyze the field of application and the therapeutic particularities of experiential psychotherapy as a form of existentialist-humanistic therapy, as well as the limits of the experiential paradigm in a postmodern context.

Keywords: *experiential psychotherapy; limits; study; emotions.*

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1. Introduction

The theoretical foundation of existential psychotherapy originates in the phenomenological and existentialist philosophy. The above mentioned philosophical perspectives were operationalized from a psychotherapeutic point of view by psychologists who belong to the current of humanistic psychology. The experiential perspective in psychotherapy includes a series of currents, starting with the classic ones, such as the person-centered therapy, founded by Carl Rogers, the Gestalt therapy, founded by Frederick Perls, the psychodrama, founded by Levy Moreno - to the modern ones, as is the case with existential, bioenergetic analysis, transactional analysis, based on the work of Eric Berne, neurolinguistic programming (NLP), based on the work of Richard Bandler and John Grinder and, last but not least, contemporary therapeutic approaches, such as transpersonal therapy, founded by Ken Wilber or, respectively, unification therapy.

The theoretical foundation of existential psychotherapy originates in the phenomenological and existentialist philosophy. The above mentioned philosophical perspectives were operationalized from a psychotherapeutic point of view by psychologists who belong to the current of humanistic psychology (Mitrofan, 2000). The experiential perspective in psychotherapy includes a series of currents, starting with the classic ones, such as the person-centered therapy, founded by Carl Rogers (1995a; 1995b), the Gestalt therapy, founded by Frederick Perls (Perls, 1973; Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951), the psychodrama, founded by Levy Moreno (1946) - to the modern ones, as is the case with existential, bioenergetic analysis, transactional analysis, based on the work of Eric Berne (2010; 2015), neurolinguistic programming (NLP), based on the work of Richard Bandler and John Grinder (2007) and, last but not least, contemporary therapeutic approaches, such as transpersonal therapy, founded by Ken Wilber or, respectively, unification therapy (Mitrofan, 2000).

2. Experiential psychotherapy - field of application and therapeutic features

Mahrer (2005) believes that experiential therapy is a therapeutic technique based on the use of therapeutic tools and activities, such as: role play, art therapy, music therapy, animal therapy, guided imagery, reliving traumatic situations or that had a strong emotional load in the past etc.

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experiences, but also emotions associated with success, self-esteem, or even responsibility. Unlocking already experienced emotions and their subjective experience is the central point of experiential therapy - whether we are talking about the experience of the immediate and the awareness of our own being, or we are talking about "frozen" experiences, to which we have no conscious access outside psychotherapeutic practices. It reconfigures our mental maps by generating behaviors that make sense only in correlation with the understanding of those emotions, that are present in the subconscious but of which we are unaware and are not effectively rationalized.

As such, experiential therapies can be used in the treatment of trauma, eating disorders, anger management, addictions, compulsive-obsessive behavior, relief from pain or emotional stress, and to gain the ability to experience the full potential of the human being, these therapies thus being effective tools in personal development.

There are two directions in understanding the experiential approach in psychotherapy. The first aims at therapeutic methods focused on undergoing the emotion and the experience "here and now", which is necessary for the awareness of one's own thinking and especially of one's own emotions. This approach makes direct reference to the need to be aware of one's person and personality, the individual being called to become autonomous, to "evolve consciously", based on taking responsibility for oneself but also for others - which derives from being aware of the freedom of choice, of how to use their own mental and social resources in achieving personal development goals. This approach emphasizes the creation of situations that allow the experience of one's own potential for self-development and, in this direction, the approach is a holistic one, targeting the psychic personality as a whole, continuing the tradition of existential-humanistic psychotherapies.

A second direction of understanding these psychotherapies is limited to approaching practical activities, such as guided visualization and guided imagery, meditation, art therapy, animal therapy - which represent supporting activities that are complementary to the dialogic approach of psychotherapy. In many concrete therapeutic situations, the experiential approach is used together with dialogical therapeutic practices, in order to facilitate access to emotional potential, develop creativity, enhance inner dialogue, but also the interaction with others (*Experiential Therapy*).

The same experiential approach can be useful when reflecting on the subjective experiences underlying decision-making strategies, thus being useful in coaching programs - both for social and professional development

and for self-knowledge and self-expression in therapeutic and post-therapeutic contexts.

The experiential perspective can be the basis for counseling sessions aimed at the personal development of the subject, but also of some therapeutic approaches specific for dysfunctions such as anxiety, frustration, aberrant behaviors etc.

3. The particularities of experiential therapy

The main feature of experiential therapy is the creation of contexts in which the client gains deep access to their own emotional processes, their own creativity, inner dialogue and a reflection on their own experiences and their nature in order to make the most appropriate decisions for their own life and the achievement of their expressive autonomy - ultimately, embracing a style and a way of life in accordance with their own values, objectives and resources.

The fundamental premise of experiential therapy is that "perception determines behavior" (*Experiential Therapy*). This premise is often completed by one of the principles of neurolinguistic programming as a particular therapeutic method that also involves the experiential approach - namely that "the map is not the same as the territory" (Bandler, & Grinder, 2007). The mental map of each individual is permanently created and reconfigured starting from their perceptions but also from the suggestions that the individual accepts from the interpretive communities in which he lives. However, perception is considered to have a fundamental role in the synthesis of behavior even if the perceived experience is filtered through what Ioan Petru Culianu called "the interpretive grid and the deforming will of individuals" (Culianu, 2015).

By re-experiencing repressed negative emotions, for example, the client can have access, by reconfiguring them, to positive emotions such as: love, forgiveness, calm - which seemed inaccessible in the past, when they were always faced with their own negative emotions, which usually occupy almost entirely the space of consciousness. Changing the emphasis on emotions reconfigures the individual's perception of reality, offering to him psychological resources for his own self-development and self-actualization.

The therapeutic practices that generate these experiences are just pretexts that facilitate the subject's access to emotional resources and the potential for self-actualization and therefore therapeutic expressions such as art therapy or certain forms of melotherapy or meditation, that create the framework in which the subject rediscovers his self-transforming

psychological potential and engages himself in what in many such therapeutic practices is called “search of one’s self” and that is why the therapist takes on the role of a guide who accompanies the client in this search for himself. Therefore, most forms of experiential therapy are client-centered, in the sense that they are somewhat rooted in client-centered Rogersian therapy - especially when it comes to the confidence in the client's potential for self-development and the unconditionally positive positioning towards the client. This approach can also be considered client-centered from the perspective of the therapist / counselor's guiding role, which aims to identify the expression and meaning that the client gives to their own experiences (Fedor, 2019), interfering as little as possible in the client's experiential processes, other than as a facilitator / a guide who facilitates deepening these experiences. The brutal intervention of the therapist that would change the meaning and direction of the experience of the seeker can cause the failure of the therapy and the personal development efforts of the "seeker" (the terms “seeker” and “guide” are taken from neurolinguistic programming, as a holistic therapy that includes tools specific to experiential therapies).

4. Experiential psychotherapy as a form of an existentialist-humanistic therapy

Existentialist-humanistic psychotherapy appears in the ‘50s of the last century as a reaction to the psychoanalytic perspective and has as a starting point the existentialist and phenomenological philosophy. This movement is also called the Movement of Human Potential (Dorofte, 1991), aiming to become a third force in psychology - along with behaviorism and psychoanalysis.

The reaction that humanistic psychologists have to the two traditional forms of expression of psychotherapy mentioned above aims primarily at the reductionism of these psychological schools of thought, which perceive man as a victim of stimulus-reaction processes, while social interactions is a sum of rewards and socially manipulated punishments or, on the other hand, a strict biological determinism that makes vital and instinctual impulses constitute the centrality of psychic life (Dorofte, 1991).

Humanistic psychology rejects mechanistic scientism and implicitly the traditional Popperian epistemology. The scientific character of the new psychologies can no longer be based on a simple extrapolation of research methods from natural sciences on the study of human behavior or personality. The ideal of intelligibility and absolute rationality of the

scientific research that can be useful in the study of natural phenomena and even in the quantitative analysis of social phenomena and some psychic phenomena fails to explain phenomena that occur in the individual psyche and lead to the formation of human personality, including phenomena such as the actualization and self-actualization of the potential of the human being, the motivation of self-realization, the social construction of identity, autonomy, ethical and social responsibility (Caras, 2016) - all these being major components of the human condition (Caras, 2016).

The failure of classical, Popperian epistemology - of a positivist or post-positivist nature - in explaining the complexity of the human condition through causal and deterministic models, leads to the need to return to the philosophical foundations of psychology and psychotherapy and, at the same time, to another epistemology. emphasizes the construction of the meaning of the psychological or social phenomenon as it appears to the individual who constructs their world of meanings starting from the subjective experience - not always rational or rationalized. Emotions, mental states or altered consciousness are part of the experience of everyday life and are a source of human behavior, and reflection on behavior - without including the comprehensive perspective on immediate or projected experience - fails to realize the complexity of human behavior and its partial irrationality.

The semantic constructions with which the individual operates in the construction of the meaning he attributes to the world are not exclusively rational, the emotions that accompanied the various events to which the individual was a participant or which the individual designed and assumed as a lived experience, even if they did not take place in reality, they are motivational drivers for the behavior of that individual. Along with the social context in which the experience takes place - including the one that leads the individual to the social construction of such a motivational driver - we can find the interpretive adrift of concepts in various communicative contexts (Taclit, 2019) and under the influence of particular emotions - updated or not - in various social contexts (Sandu, 2012).

The epistemic pressure on psychology is doubled by a pragmatic one, namely the need to shift the emphasis from the simple analysis of the human condition to a psychological or social practice designed to actualize human potential in increasingly dynamic contexts imposed by modern society and subsequently by postmodern ones.

The emergence of humanistic psychology appeals to the explanatory models of the human condition existing in that period - the '50s - of which the most important were phenomenology and existentialism, aiming at translating these theoretical approaches into therapeutic practices. The

phenomenological orientation towards the immediate and the perceived experience allowed a therapeutic emphasis on what constitutes the psychological or social reality for the individual and the way in which one experiences various events, how one experiences them subjectively, how one gives them meaning and how one uses these meanings for the construction of other events in one's own life and, last but not least, of the meaning of one's own life.

Humanistic psychology includes heterogeneous practices, thus not a single therapeutic school, such as psychoanalysis or behaviorism, but several psychological currents, more or less relevant from an epistemic point of view, which have in common the idea of personal development and the desire of psychologists - but also of philosophers, social workers who base their practice on these therapeutic models - to build effective transformative practices for the individual and "to represent social and human engineerings" (Zamfir, 1982).

All these models belonging to humanistic psychology (both those mentioned in the introduction to this paper and others such as: neo-Freudian approaches, Jungian analysis, group therapies etc.) aim to represent models of individual and human change (Pages, 1969), ultimately succeeding in substantiating a true culture of personal development (Greenberg, Safran, & Rice, 1989) in conjunction with the social deconstruction of systemic metanarratives of modernity, placing the self-actualized and sometimes socially delocalized individual at the center of a hyper-consumerist society. The medicalized society, the society that treats each individual as a potential ailing person or a potential patient, for whom there is at least one diagnosis in the DSM that applies to him, comes in conjunction with that of personal development at any cost - which exhibits frustrations and anxieties, projecting them on others in order to give way to the inherent but partially undiscovered positivity of the improved individual - more or less fit to society and its own aspirations.

5. From personal to transpersonal in the experiential approach

Experimental therapy is frequently used in the therapy for phobias, in the treatment of behavioral disorders, eating disorders, in anger management therapy, in couple therapy. These therapeutic tools are useful both in counseling practices for personal development, in psychological and psycho-social counseling, but also in the psychological therapy of some pathological conditions, as an adjuvant in psychiatric therapy.

The intrapersonal objective of experiential therapy is the discovery of one's own self, of one's own individuality, as they are subjectively experienced by the person in relation to their own corporeality, but also their own emotionality. Often, experiential therapies aim at a transpersonal goal, in correlation with the spiritual orientation of the client, but also of the therapist, generally aiming to access the experience of human unity with the Universe, which allows the individual to overcome the limits of his own self. From this perspective, the objective of experiential therapy is the annihilation of alienation through various depersonalizing instances and, paradoxically, the attainment of universality of the human being.

From the perspective of transpersonal therapy, the individual is able to unify with the universal consciousness, the latent potential of the individual - idea taken from Rogersian therapies - is now seen as a universalizing energy, as the often stated goal of these therapies is to achieve a higher level of consciousness and integration of body, mind and spirit. In this direction, meditative practices, but also philosophical approaches specific to the Orient are re-signified from the perspective of therapeutic values, but the therapy does not aim at psychological disorders, but rather at self-fulfillment.

Although the experiential approach is eclectic, it is strongly influenced - at least in its transpersonal dimension - by the works of Eckhart Tolle (2017), Ken Wilber (1977; 1982) and, previously, those of Carl Gustav Jung (1979; 1980).

6. The limits of the experiential paradigm and the failure of personal development as a project of an inauthentic postmodernity

The rise of this neospiritualist movement in contemporary society entails experiential psychotherapy in the heterogeneous amalgam of New Age practices, sometimes used to pseudo-scientifically justify some neopsychedelic practices allegedly derived from Eastern meditative practices - Vedantine, Shivaist or Buddhist – but re-interpreted from a neo-yogin and neo-tantric perspective, an interpretive adrift adapted to the postmodern preferences of the seeker of spiritual surrogates that would justify, based on reinterpreted tantric texts, the lack of real effort for personal development and the replacement of spiritual and metaphysical depth by the expressive self-sufficiency of common pseudo-illuminates. From this perspective, experiential therapy - although important when applied by professional and honest psychologists or therapists from an intellectual and professional point of view - can be the basis of limited, but financially attractive approaches,

replacing the real experience of a deep knowledge of the self with phantasmagoric oneiric experiences.

Of course, the phantasmagoric is a subject of experience for the honest seeker, as this is an expression of the self that must be experienced or decoded according to the specific therapeutic approaches, thus offering a potential for emotional and even spiritual growth to the client of such a therapy. When superficial oneiric experiences are confused with deep states of transpersonal consciousness - cosmic ecstasy, samadhi etc. – it devalues the real experience, if it really exists and can be experienced, and deminishes real experiential practice, both in what regards the psychotherapeutic approach and the actual meditative experience.

The proliferation of such pseudo-therapeutic practices, lacking the experience of the authentic practice, drives - under the influence of the consumerist society - the possible transformative experience of personal - and possibly, spiritual - development into a superficial postmodern surrogate that has no real transformative force, but rather encourages society towards a false ideal of personal - and sometimes transpersonal – development, as long as we are talking about personal development textbooks for fifth grade children and other such ideas as psychotherapy for all.

The medicalized society and the dependence on psychiatric interventions that replace psychotherapy propose for each state of consciousness which is specific to the human condition - from love to anxiety - a diagnosis and a treatment.

7. Conclusions

Experiential psychotherapy, as a component of humanistic psychotherapies it is actually partially confused with, represents a recovery of the existentialist and phenomenological philosophical tradition from the perspective of the therapeutic value of the immediate experience. This experience of the immediate allows the subject to deepen his self-search in terms of experiencing the authentic and to develop the potential for self-actualization inherent in the human being.

Humanistic psychotherapy in general and experiential psychotherapy in particular, when valued from a postmodern perspective, generate a social and cultural stream related to the promotion of personal development and implicitly the reconstruction of the humane from the perspective of the self - sometimes selfish, but deconstructive to the claims of various social systems that tend to keep the individual self and the social personality of individuals under the control of values that transcend those of the

individual. Transpersonal unification - holistic in essence - is antisystemic: the unification of man with the Cosmos is no longer seen as a subordination of the individual to the universal but as an identification between the personal and the transpersonal side.

As main limits of this approach, we can identify the emphasis placed on the medicalization of social life - precisely by the emergence of influential promoters of the so-called personal development of an experiential and even transpersonal type, as well as the risk of superficiality in approaching personal development on the principles of egotic self-sufficiency.

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