

Loewenthal, D. (2017). *Existential Psychotherapy and Counselling after Postmodernism: Practice, Theory and Research*. Routledge.

# **Part One: Existentialism after postmodernism and the psychological therapies**

## **Chapter 1: Introduction: Existential psychotherapy and counselling after postmodernism and R. D. Laing**

This chapter has been written specifically to introduce this book of my collected works.

I am interested in phenomenology and existentialism, as David Cooper has written, 'existentialism is worth revisiting at intervals for the help it may offer with themes of contemporary interest' (1990: vii). But what happened to phenomenology with the advent of postmodernism; and, what are the potential implications of this for existential psychotherapy and counselling (and psychotherapy and counselling more generally) in the twenty-first century? Are we now in a neoliberal world where '...we are all – like it or not - post-modern existentialists, searching for connections and meanings, trying to find our way' (Margulies, 1999:704<sup>1</sup>)? This book, comprising a collection of my work, can be seen as an exploration of these questions.

Like so many young people of the 1960s, I was influenced by the existential-analytic psychiatrist R. D. Laing (1960, 1969, 1972, 1990), and in my case particularly his book 'The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise' (1967). For example, '...the really decisive moments in psychotherapy, as every patient or therapist who has experienced them knows, are unpredictable, unique, unforgettable, always unrepeatable and often indescribable' (Laing, 1967:34). In 1980, after having been involved in counselling, including being personally introduced to existentialism by Emmy van Deurzen, I started my training at the Philadelphia Association in London, which Laing and others had established (and where Laing was in the process of being booted out!). It was here that I developed my interest in continental philosophy.

This book is less about existential psychotherapists, such as Binswanger, Boss, Frankl, van Deurzen, Spinelli, and more about revisiting some implications for psychotherapy and counselling of the existentialism and phenomenology

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Donna Orange in Frie and Orange (2009), *Beyond Postmodernism*, p. 120

stemming from those such as Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau Ponty, Levinas in the light of postmodernism. Thus whilst my students over the years have found Yalom's (1980) givens of death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness a useful introduction and then 'progressed' to Rollo May's (1961) six characteristics of the existing person, this book tries to avoid such enumeration as struggling with original texts is regarded as being an essential aspect of existentialism. In this way, the book can be seen as one evolution of R. D. Laing's approach to existentialism, including the influence of psychoanalysis, though this is preceded by giving a primacy to the existential relationship.

This collection is for those who privilege such notions as meaning and experience in ways of becoming in the world with others that can be astonishing and changing. In some ways this can be seen as an attempt to revisit for example Kierkegaard's 'becoming', Heidegger's 'in the world with others', and Laing's 'experience'. However,

*'A part of existentialism's popular appeal may have been that it provided a way to think through the issues of choice and individual responsibility. But as a theory of the self existentialism remained within Cartesianism. Its psychology tended to portray the individual as a rational, conscious actor who could understand the basis for his or her action. It remained firmly rooted in a philosophy of individual autonomy and rational choice' (Sarup, 1993:5-6).*

The inherent ego-centric narcissism of existentialism is criticised through postmodernism in this book, with the hope of freeing up both existentialism and ourselves. This is regarded as a vitally important opportunity before we are submerged in neoliberalism's hypermodernity (Attali, 2013). The problem seems to be that a circle gets closed, which destroys the initial vibrancy and potentiality. An example of this is given by Sarup above, who precedes this with:

*'A few years later, during the May '68 uprising, it was felt by many students and workers that a liberated politics could only emerge from liberated interpersonal relationships, and there was an explosion of interest in Lacanian psychoanalysis – a movement which seemed to reconcile existentialism and Marxism.' (Sarup, 1993:5)*

But then where is Marxism in existentialism, Lacanian or any other form of psychoanalysis today?

Furthermore, founding authors of existentialism, as with the humanism and psychoanalysis of those such as Rogers and Freud (who, importantly, are not dismissed in this book), have been simplified and are in danger of being sanitised. Thus existential talking therapies have been popularised through the schemas of those such as May and Yalom in the USA and Spinelli, van Deurzen and Cooper in the UK. However, this book is more about the implications for our practice of being influenced by existential thinkers, whilst in keeping with these philosophers minimising doing this through a framework. As mentioned, it might be seen as a development of R. D. Laing's more existential-analytic approach.

Existentialism thus is of less help 'with themes of contemporary interest' as it has become increasingly stuck in a 1950's modernism where everything returns to the subject who is not subject to language, an unconscious, writing, the political, etc. It is as if existentialism allows for expressions of good and evil, albeit in a world which it itself is influenced by a positive psychology.

Being commissioned to write this book about my collected works, I see as requesting me to write a story revisiting some of the previous stories I have told. In thinking about this, I do of course privilege certain notions, but hopefully this cannot be reduced to a simple schema, particularly given my criticism above, which could be more than just an envious attack on others' greater popularity! I have become clearer (Loewenthal, 2011) that the psychological therapies are better seen as cultural practices (Wittgenstein; Heaton, 1990). Freud and others first discovered practices, which they then tried to develop theories for and they and we continued to attempt to legitimise using changing notions of research, which can also be seen as cultural practices.

However, I will try and note what I think are my assumptions underlying this book, which are: i) to start with practice; ii) that existential ideas (and other theories) have implications rather than applications for practice; iii) to wonder whether existential concerns need not be just narcissistic or egocentric – we are all subject to language et al and it is better to give a primacy to heteronomy over autonomy; iv) it is important in listening to be open to what comes to mind and be able to wonder how much it's one's own associations; v) to be able to stay with not knowing; vi) that research is another changing cultural practice and does not necessarily have much to do with being thoughtful; vii) that so long as one doesn't start with them, some psychoanalytic notions and practices can be helpful; and viii) that the political/ideological is everywhere. With regard to this latter point, in planning this book there was the question of where to place the political/ideological. Rather than tacking it on somewhere, it seemed more appropriate to start with questioning where we are coming from politically as psychotherapists and counsellors – though we may not realise it.

Phenomenology was intertwined with existentialism by Heidegger, through Husserl. Levinas brought this to France influencing not only those such as Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir and Sartre, but also a further generation including Lyotard and Derrida. Indeed this book could have, perhaps should have, been called 'Phenomenological Psychotherapy and Counselling after Postmodernism'. Another possibility for this book's title was 'Some Implications of Post-Existentialism (Existentialism after Postmodernism) for Psychotherapy and Counselling', for in many ways it traces different notions of phenomenology for therapeutic practices. There are however two other strands in this book, which may be less in evidence in other more recent texts on existential psychotherapy and counselling. The first is the presence of psychoanalysis. Indeed, yet another title for this book might have been 'Existential-Analytic Psychotherapy and Counselling after Postmodernism', or 'Existential Psychotherapy, Psychoanalysis and Counselling'. (There again, the title 'Some implications of existentialism after postmodernism for psychotherapy and counselling' might have been more appropriate.) Thus the term 'existential-analytic' will be considered, beyond implying a loosening up, to include some

psycho-analytic notions. There is the caveat that existential must come before analytic – ‘being in the world with others’ must precede any psychoanalytic or other technical frame-up. However, at least early Freud can usefully be read phenomenologically, as Freud, after all, did, as with Husserl, attend Brentano’s lectures on descriptive psychology. Furthermore, in my own practice and in supervising others, I have often considered it helpful when the client has explored founding relationships discovering they have repressed what was too difficult to acknowledge, in what might for them have been traumatic situations. There is the question of how far should one consider here psychoanalytic concepts? In general, as with any theory, I attempt to minimise using such technical language and reification. However, this doesn’t mean that an idea, of for example Jacques Lacan, can’t helpfully come to mind when working with somebody; but, to adopt completely adopt Lacanian or any other school of therapy is a totalising move greatly increasing, as will be argued, doing violence to the client. (The terms ‘client’ and ‘patient’ are used interchangeably in this book. I think it is also noteworthy that probably the most important phenomenological influence in the talking therapies is through the humanistic tradition of Carl Rogers, who was influenced by Kierkegaard amongst others. (Indeed, as a way of helping my students over the last thirty and more years start with practice, I have introduced them initially to Rogers, whilst subsequently as with all other theories, been critical of this.

Hence, the other important development for me is the place of the political in existentialism. Previously as for those early Lacanian students, and existentialists such as Sartre, the political was very much part of practice (indeed, Sartre was also very knowledgeable about psychoanalysis in arguing against it). It would appear that our current era of late capitalism (now more frequently termed ‘neo-liberalism’) has been very successful in removing radicalism in general, including from existentialism. Yet, as Hannah Arendt, whom I previously wrongly ignored, pointed out, it’s *how* we are in the world with others that is so vitally important. Our alienation is now such that it seems we can’t even see the potential for self-interest in the common good.

I have been very influenced by Levinas, who was very influenced by Heidegger but was also critical of him, arguing that the ethical must proceed the ontological – our responsibility to put the other first before ourselves. So whilst I suggested previously that existentialism should come before any psychoanalysis, if only ‘being’ is read by this, it too quickly becomes ‘my being’. More recently, I have been interested in how one might operationalise this, not just in terms of our responsibility for the client’s responsibility but our responsibility socially, economically and ideologically for others’ responsibilities in these spheres. I have previously written of existentialism after postmodernism and attempted to also consider psychoanalysis and the political, as ‘post-existentialism’ (see for example Chapter 4 and 14). With this book, I was tempted to return to calling all this ‘existentialism’. In so doing, I had hoped there would be a greater chance the term ‘existentialism’ could continue to ‘astonish and change’ (Heaton, 1990) rather than being imprisoned and contorted by modernism. But I decided that this would currently be a step too far.

As mentioned earlier, it would appear that we are now in an era beyond postmodernism, which some would call 'hyper-modern' (Attali, 2013; Charles & Lipovetsky, 2006). Here, there is an even deeper faith than in modernism in our ability to understand, control and manipulate every aspect of human experience. Such thinking will return us to egocentricism, whereas this book is attempting to create a space where after postmodern ideas we can lessen our desire to understand, control and manipulate ours and others' experiences, but instead be open to potential existential registers that would otherwise be muted if not strangled.

## **Some Questions<sup>2</sup>**

From such a new existential/post-existential perspective, we might ask questions such as the following about all psychological therapies (throughout this book, psychotherapy and counselling are used interchangeably and are seen as part of the psychological therapies, which includes counselling psychology and arts and play therapies. Psychoanalysis is regarded as a type of psychotherapy but is also at times referred to separately):

1. Is psychotherapy first and foremost a practice?
2. Are theories more attempts to explain practice?
3. Do changes in this practice have more to do with changes in our culture that lead us to be more interested in different theories?
4. Is research another cultural practice which changes to legitimise the changing dominant culture?
5. What place has psychoanalysis in all this?
6. Is post-existentialism just attempting to replace one theory with another or is it as my colleague Richard House has kindly said, 'a reformulation of existentialist ideas within therapeutic practice which prepares the ground for the critical deconstruction of these very same foundations'?
7. To what extent is our attachment to a particular theory to do with inadequacies in our own foundations and to what extent does any change threaten our very foundations?
8. Or, are all these different psychotherapeutic notions really to keep the psychotherapist occupied while something else therapeutically useful can happen?

---

<sup>2</sup> Presented at Psychotherapy without Foundations? Freud Museum, Public Lecture Programme, Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> October, 2011, Anna Freud Centre, London.

This book, by considering existentialism after postmodernism (post-existentialism), is compiled to provide an exploration of such questions as the above, and is organised into six parts. In this first part, 'Existentialism after postmodernism and the Psychological Therapies', the next chapter briefly gives an introductory overview to phenomenology and existentialism. This is followed in Chapter 3 by a description of postmodernism and then in Chapter 4, post-existentialism. As mentioned, in organising the book, there was a question as to where the political should come in. In most psychotherapy and counselling books, it would appear ignored and indeed, it would appear that that's how most psychotherapists and counsellors would like it to remain! However, here for this book, the position is taken up that what is vital is the overall lens through which psychotherapists and counsellors see the world, and it therefore comes next. Thus part two is termed 'Practice, ideologies and politics: now you see it, now you don't!' The following part, three, again as with all parts, starts with practice and is termed 'Practice: practice issues and the nature of psychotherapeutic knowledge'. The next part, four, 'Practice and theory: implications not applications' explores theoretical implications for practice and part five is termed 'Practice: research or thoughtful practice?' Part six provides some concluding thoughts and a postscript.

## References

- Attali, J. (2013). *Histoire de la Modernité: comment l'humanité pense son avenir*. Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont.
- Charles, S. and Lipovetsky, G. (2006). *Hypermodern Times*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Cooper, D. E. (1990), *Existentialism: A reconstruction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Frie, R. and D. Orange, (2009) (Eds). *Beyond Postmodernism: New Dimensions in Clinical Theory and Practice*. New York: Routledge
- Heaton, J. (1990), 'What is Existential Analysis?', *Journal of the Society for Existential Analysis*, No. 1.
- Laing, R.D. (1960) *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*. Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Laing R.D. (1967) *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise*. London: Tavistock Publications.

- Laing, R. D. (1969) *Self and Others* (2nd Edition). London: Routledge
- Laing, R. D. (1972). *Knots*. London: Penguin.
- Laing, R. D. (1990). *Sanity, Madness and the Family: Families of Schizophrenics*. London: Penguin.
- Margulies, A. (1999). The end of analysis? Or, our postmodern existential situation. A review essay on *Ritual and spontaneity in the psychoanalytic process: A dialectical-constructivist view* by Irwin Z. Hoffman. *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 35, 699-712.
- May, R. (1961). *Existential Psychology*. New York: Random House.
- Sarup, M. (1993) *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*. London : Harvester Wheatsheaf.

