

Existential humanistic approach

Psychology



An existential-humanistic approach emphasizes choice, unconditional regard for the client and optimism regarding change. As Gerald Corey (2001) d, " The existential approach stresses a concern for what it means to be fully human. It suggests certain themes that are part of the human condition, such as freedom and responsibility, anxiety, guilt, awareness of being finite, creating meaning in the world, and shaping ones future by making active choices" (p. 9).

This emphasis on personal choice and capacity for change represents an historical departure from the more deterministic stance of traditional psychoanalysis. It also represents a more open-ended and less directive approach than competing behaviorist and brief therapy models.

As Fitch (2001) and others have noted, " Several authors have indicated that the client-counselor relationship is more significant in positive counseling outcomes than are the techniques and models used." However, Corey (2001) has stated that " one limitation of the approach is the way some practitioners become 'client-centered' to the extent that they diminish the value of their own power as a person and thus lose the impact of their personality on the client" (p. 185).

With an emphasis on awareness and growth, this model may work best with people who are already high-functioning, intelligent and self-aware, people who may have only minor adjustment problems that are a natural consequence of change and growth.

A major strength of this approach, for working with a student population, is the emphasis on individual responsibility for change. Inviting the student to identify personal goals for growth, while the therapist acts as a facilitator, provides the opportunity for self-

determination and natural development toward mature decision-making, without the imposition of an other-determined agenda driven by diagnostics. A student population should already be intelligent and self-regulating, relative to other potential populations. A humanistic orientation in counseling underscores and reinforces the deeper dynamics of what students should be gaining in the process of education.

One weakness of the existential-humanistic approach, for working with a student population, is the time-intensive aspect of exploring options for growth, relative to students who may be faced with serious and urgent problems. Intervention may be called for and a strictly humanistic counselor may be hesitant to impose directive measures.

Another weakness is the time-intensive aspect relative to how much time the counselor can realistically devote to a particular student. Some aspects of brief therapy may be called for, depending upon a realistic assessment of session time and duration.

On the other hand, certain student populations with sensitive needs may respond particularly well to the humanistic model and its client-centered approach. As Chen (2005) observed, in relation to assisting students with minority sexual orientations:

" The core characteristics of person-centered counseling, namely, congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathy, seem to form not only a conceptual, but also a practical rationale for helping intervention for LGBT clients. These conditions are particularly relevant for this helping context for several reasons. With a congruence attitude, the counselor is a genuine helper who does not wear a mask in the helping process. The counselor's unconditional positive regard reaches out to the client with a

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nonjudgmental acceptance; that is, the client is genuinely accepted as a human being with his or her values and identity, regardless of his or her sexual orientation and the identity development stage he or she is in. Furthermore, the communication of empathy allows the counselor to enter the client's phenomenological world, understanding the LGBT identity development from the unique experience and perspectives of each individual client. Combined, these fundamental principles that form the person-centered approach seem to provide a safe, understanding, and facilitative helping environment that is appropriate for LGBT clients." One might contend that what is good for LGBT adolescents is good for broader student populations as well. Brief therapy models--while a favorite of insurance companies and managed health organizations--may ultimately prove insufficient for addressing the ongoing needs of complex and diverse student populations. And traditional, directive models from psychoanalysis and behaviorism, may fail in sensitivity and also in keeping up with changing times. Client-centered humanistic and existential approaches are philosophically grounded, deeply respectful of individual needs and immensely flexible as holistic approaches to therapy, understanding and change.

References

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