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Applying Existential Therapy to the Case Study of Tom

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Existentialism is an attitudinal approach to issues of living that address matters of ontology, asking questions like where do I come from, who am I, or who will I become? In this paper, we examine Tom in our case study through an existentialist perspective by first identifying key assumptions and then exploring common themes of living and dying, freedom, responsibility and choice, isolation and loving, and meaning and meaninglessness. Finally, we look at goals and techniques of existential therapists and their relationship with their clients, and then apply those ideas to Tom’s case.

Key Assumptions

Applying an existential approach to Tom’s therapeutic process first requires the consideration of several key existential assumptions. The first of these assumptions is the idea that an individual cannot fully experience her humanity without also being fully aware of how she fits in with the world around her. With regard to this assumption and based on what is known about Tom from the case study, it seems as though he has a very limited sense of awareness of the ways in which his existence is connected to and intertwined with the outside world. Furthermore, Tom’s careless attitude, compulsive lying, and extensive criminal history all paint a portrayal of him as someone who is generally apathetic when it comes to relationships of any kind.

More specifically, Tom’s relationship with his physical environment is one of objectification and consumption, as he looks only for how he can benefit from that which is around him. While Tom’s relationships with the realms of religion and spirituality are not directly addressed by the case study, we assume that he feels no devotion towards a higher power. Concerning interpersonal relationships, Tom seeks to control his interactions with others in ways that are manipulative and abusive, yet immediately gratifying. Finally, Tom clearly lacks depth of self-understanding as he appears to have normalized impulsivity, and seems motivated only by desires that are materialistic and/or purely physical/biological. These apathetic and inauthentic ways of being prove him to be a truly unfulfilled individual who is disconnected from his feelings about who he is as a person, what he stands for, and who he might like to become.

A second key assumption of existentialism that can be applied to Tom’s case is that the perception of time can serve to either stifle or motivate creativity and zest for life. Being a younger man who has had much handed to him without ever having to work for it or follow through with responsibilities to others, it is highly probable that Tom views time as endless. For him, there has been no growth, no passion, and no worthwhile goal in which to invest. Time passes and he remains stagnant. Life is cyclical: He perpetrates, his parents pay his way out of trouble, he faces no meaningful consequences, and then he repeats the process. The only things that ever change for him are his age and the nature of the offenses he commits.

Anxiety as a predictable part of life is one last salient existential assumption that Tom should be encouraged to explore in therapy. Although always initially able to outwardly present himself as confident, capable, and well put together, the passing of enough time always gives way to the realistic image of Tom as someone who is intensely distraught and struggling. The inner anxiety Tom feels due to the often harmful ways in which he chooses to experience life is especially pronounced in the section of the case study which discusses his work history.

Common Themes

There are also at least four common existential themes that relate to both Tom’s case and the above named existential assumptions of being-in-the-world awareness, time, and anxiety. The first theme is living and dying. For Tom, life and death seem to blur together, as he places little value on either. His brushes with danger, fire, and violence could be viewed as volatile attempts to test the boundaries between the two realities of life and death as he unconsciously grasps for meaning and purpose in his own existence.

A second theme is freedom, responsibility, and choice. In Tom’s life, no one, including his parents, the justice system, and his co-workers, has ever held him completely accountable for the destructive choices he makes. In addition to the existential principle that we all have the freedom of personal choice, Tom’s ability to smooth talk his way out of trouble, his family’s high socioeconomic status, and the fact that he presents as a heterosexual male in a homophobic and heterosexist society, all grant him the power and privilege to act in whatever ways he wishes. Yet, because the element of responsibility is often missing from his actions, Tom’s sense of “freedom” is without reasonable limits and actually works against him.

With regard to isolation & loving as a third existential theme, Tom has made only shallow attempts to connect with others. Still, it is important to credit him with these efforts, as they show again his sense of disconnection from the social world and his unarticulated desire to experience relationships that truly are authentic.

The fourth and final theme is meaning and meaninglessness. Again, Tom’s apparent moral meanderings, his lack of commitment to most responsibilities, and his disregard for authority point to the fact that he views his life as one without purpose or value.

Goals and Techniques

Now that key assumptions and common themes of existential therapy have been established, we look at its goals and techniques and how a therapist may choose to apply this to Tom. Authenticity, or the realization of one’s full potential of being-in-the-world, is the main goal of existential therapy. For Tom to achieve this goal, therapy will need to help him begin the process of working towards increasingly authentic relationships with his physical environment, others and himself.

An overarching goal for the therapist is to make sure she shows therapeutic love for Tom.  Regardless if Tom presents his hostile side or charming side, the therapist must form a deep caring attitude towards Tom that is authentic and genuine.  There may be some resistance or transference from Tom, but it is the therapist’s job to work to build this real authentic intimate relationship.

The therapist must first do an initial assessment of Tom, listening for themes of isolation, meaninglessness, responsibility, and mortality. With Tom's countless arrests and returns to jail, many of these themes are likely to surface.  In talking about these issues, the therapist must continually assess the client's authenticity, which may be particularly difficult since he has impressed authorities and employees in the past, but later altered his behaviors.  The therapist must be careful to note *true* authenticity.

One topic that existential therapist may chose to explore to identify the above mentioned themes is dream interpretation.  The therapist may ask Tom to talk about the dreams he has been having, and note how the client interprets the dream.  Connecting these dreams to waking experiences and vice-versa may provide some insight into authenticity.

Another technique that an existential therapist may opt to try is the use of objective and projective tests.  There are several tests available that evaluate themes, meaning of life, goals, anxiety, etc.  While used mainly for research, these tests can sometimes be applied to therapy as well.

In our class presentation, we will conduct a role play of a few potential sessions with Tom and the therapist. There, you will see how we see these techniques applied specifically to Tom’s case. Below are a few particular suggestions of how to apply existential therapy to Tom’s situation.

* Hold him accountable for his actions, starting small and working towards larger, more important things. This will encourage attachments to others.
* Within therapy, layout an understanding of the pain he feels so as to guide him towards patient/therapist interactions that are as honest as possible.
* Involve his parents in therapeutic process as a way to give him grounding.
* Ask him to put his immediate wants second to the immediate needs of others. Consider enlisting Tom in community service, immersion projects, etc.

Patient/Therapist Relationship

For any of the above mentioned suggestions to work and for true authenticity from the client to be achieved, the therapist must cultivate a relationship of genuine, positive regard.  Throughout therapy, the therapist should consistently maintain a feeling of authentic love for the client and during meetings they should not only be mentally present, but emotionally as well. Each patient/therapist relationship will differ but all focus on therapeutic love; this bond can be seen as a loving friendship with true openness and care. This type of relationship can also be made visible in terms of non-verbal communication, or body language shown. The patient/therapist relationship is one of “physical closeness” as well as mental attendance. Bodies are usually very close in proximity, bent towards each other and although they won’t be touching, physical presence is very calming.

The therapist must also set personal boundaries. The relationship may prove to be taxing on the therapist, as he/she must maintain dual-authenticity. It is absolutely essential for the therapist to be open and authentic to the client, but they must also remain honest and authentic with themselves. They will strive to develop genuine, caring encounters, but also must ensure that those encounters are not in conflict with the development of the client and the personal needs of the therapist. In moving towards that authenticity in the client, therapists must still continue to explore the existential common themes outline in this paper.

Conclusion

In exploring assumptions, themes, goals, and techniques of existential therapy, we believe that this approach can help Tom show authenticity and identify who he is in this world and a meaningful purpose to his existence. While we realize that this will be difficult to recognize true authenticity, we are confident that if a skilled existential therapist can get Tom to be honest and open with her, then progress will be made. Without therapy, his destructive behaviors will continue and may even become graver than prostitution, grand theft auto, or cruelty to animals.