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Working with Individuality vs. Mutuality in Existential-Humanistic Family Therapy

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The potency of existential humanistic psychotherapy may be felt when working in the moment with the paradox of human existence as "a part of [a group] and apart from" others (M. Heery, personal communication, International Institute for Humanistic Studies, Unearthing the Moment, Course 1, July 8-10, 2005). That is, living in both "mutuality and individuation" (M. Heery, personal communication, International Institute for Humanistic Studies, Unearthing the Moment, Course 3, June 23-25, 2006). This paper attempts to show how this particular aspect of existential-humanistic psychotherapy is applicable in family therapy, including work with children and couples.

Existential Humanistic Family Therapy

Experiential Family Therapy

Experiential family therapy was built on the work of Carl Whittaker and Virginia Satir, and has undergone a resurgence of interest and development since then to show that its inherent integration of existential, humanistic, and family systemic approaches (Nichols & Schwarz, 2006) is extremely powerful and useful. This is because the "goal of individual growth is merged with the goal of strengthening the family unit. . . . [Hence], belongingness and individuation go hand in hand" (Nichols & Schwarz, p. 203). This is different from the traditional family systems approach that focuses on individuation as the goal to effectively changing a family, where the lack of deepening limits higher order change. Moreover, experiential family therapy focuses on each individual's genuine expression, which in turn strengthens the family through freeing from defenses and subsequent emotional deepening (Nichols & Schwarz). In a multicultural society where the western bias for individuation can do more harm than good for families, the importance of balancing individuality with mutuality is of utmost importance.

It is important to acknowledge that while individuation can be a systemic intervention on enmeshed families, joining through each member's deepening via genuine reflection and expression can be essential in a family's cohesion and development as a group. The combination of cooperation, autonomy, and intimacy will allow families to develop towards self-regulated interdependence (M. Heery, personal communication, International Institute for Humanistic Studies, Unearthing the Moment, Course 3, June 23-35, 2006). This is included in the working stage of experiential group development called "cohesive engagement" (Kottler, 2001, p. 58).

Couples

While still working with the individuality vs. mutuality paradox, many couples often need to focus on differentiation prior to developing towards mutual interdependence (Bader & Pearson, 1998). Differentiation plays a pivotal point in Bader and Pearson's developmental stages of couple's relationships, based on Margaret Mahler's childhood stages of development. These sequential stages of each relational development are: symbiosis, differentiation, practice, rapprochement, and mutual interdependence (Bader & Pearson, 1988). More importantly, the couple's developmental stages all rely on the existential notion of living as a part and apart from the dyad relationship. Symbiosis is at the enmeshed end of the spectrum, and differentiation is at the individualized extreme. Practice and rapprochement can be interpreted as the attempts to master and integrate the two, respectively.

The simplified message is that if two people are to live, love, and grow together, they must know how to coexist together as individuals who can discern their own wants and needs from their partner's, with mutual respect. A noteworthy humanistic implication

in all of this is the belief that human beings are auto-regulating and self-potentiating—i.e. a healthy person does not need as much direction as one might think because of an innate knowledge of what one's own needs. They key for therapists may be to help clients tune in to discover their emotions and needs, i.e. to deepen.

Mutual interdependence is the mark of highly developed couples (Bader & Pearson, 1998), and groups (M. Heery, personal communication, International Institute for Humanistic Studies, Unearthing the Moment, Course 3, June 23-35, 2006). One may take this notion one step further to say that it is also a sign of a healthy family; Mutual interdependence in a family is the integrated and balanced expression of genuine individuality and mutuality between members.

Personal Experiences of Applying Existential Humanistic Psychotherapy

Children

In work with children ages 6 through 12, existential humanistic work takes on a different form. In children's groups, process is difficult at latency ages. However, existential dilemmas can be found throughout their lives and children seem to naturally understand them. Being apart of and apart from is of high importance in the groups. Working with their resistances is also a large part of the work; their defenses are very strong at times. Deepening is a slow and difficult process, especially because children are usually still bound by concrete thinking.

Children's groups cannot deepen to any significant point without first providing some psychoeducation about emotion. That is, building mindfulness around what emotions feel like kinesthetically, through experiential learning and association with typical triggering events in their lives. Theoretically, once and emotions vocabulary is

built, the group could deepen with time. However, children's narcissistic behavior tends to limit the safety of the group.

Hence, the first existential dilemma that exists in a children's group is the very focus of this paper. Each child realizes, if he or she is to remain in the group, that safe behavior acknowledges and respects each child as an individual, and the group as a whole. Thus, a group contract (M. Heery, personal communication, International Institute for Humanistic Studies, Unearthing the Moment, Course 3, June 23-35, 2006) that contains a list of safety agreements and consequences must be made to ensure safety (Moe & Ways, 1991). Although it may not be stated abstractly to the children, setting these agreements incorporates personal responsibility into the group foundation, and acknowledges that each child must consider their own needs, along with the safety of his or her peers. That is, live in the group as a part of it and apart from it. When the child feels the consequences of breaking group agreements, it is a clash between the extremes of this paradox. To use Gestalt terminology, in learning how to effectively *aggress* into his or her environment while not endangering others, with the help and psychoeducation of the group leader, the child is participating in existential humanistic work.

Before long, children's defenses begin to surface in the group. With children, they emerge as ways to cover up their feelings when it is unsafe to express them (Moe & Ways, 1991). Virginia Satir describes how family members can become "trapped in … roles like those of the *victim, placator, defiant one,* or *rescuer*" (Nichols & Schwartz, 2006, p. 30). Other forms of these roles commonly seen in children include the *scapegoat, lost child, mascot/joker,* and the *hero*. The difficulty is that children may be so locked onto their defensive roles that they continue to display them in a safe

environment.

At times, however, remaining in the moment with children and empathically reflecting current behavior may bring some awareness. Coupled with brief psychoeducation about feelings and communication, highly defensive children may sometimes lower their defenses and allow deeper emotions to emerge in the group. Once a single child in the group begins to deepen into their emotions and disclose it, group interventions such as *reframing* and then *linking* (Kottler, 2001) his or her experiences to those of others in the group can often help the group as a whole to deepen. One should note that this is playing on the mutuality vs. individuality paradox in the moment of processing. This kind of work not only sets the child free of his or her defenses in the group, but with practice, they can reach a level of mastery that still allows them to utilize their defenses in an unsafe home environment, and lower them when they can recognize safety to do so.

In working with children individually, much of the same applies as it does with groups. In this case, the linking can be done through the therapist's self-disclosure when he or she recognizes defensive behavior. Therapists will also do well to normalize the child's feelings as a part or the child experience, while still emphasizing the unique situations or strengths that set the child apart from other. In individual work with children, safety is accomplished by healthy joining with the therapists. One does not have to worry about unsafe behaviors of peers blocking the deepening process. The work may focus on allowing the child to experience life as a part of their family, and as an individual with needs and wishes that deserve to be expressed. Overall, remaining in the moment and working from an existential-humanistic stance seems easier with individual

children than it is with children in groups.

Overall, the most un-intrusive existential-humanistic work can be done with children through play. Child-centered play therapy (Landreth & Sweeny, 1997), while empathically reflecting the child's autonomous play, allows for in the child to practice aggressing into their environment in healthy ways, which is a goal in Gestalt play therapy (Carroll & Oaklander, 1997). The child is kept in the moment by the therapist's empathic reflection. The child practices being a part of the therapeutic relationship, as well as being an individual in the room with the therapist. Using these methods, the child's defenses naturally are lowered, which facilitates further deepening in therapy.

A Personal Connection: A Part Of and Apart From in Intimate Relationships

This author has gained much in applying the interplay between mutuality and individuality in a personal romantic relationship. That is, integration of kinesthetic senses of contact, proximity, and awareness of another body. This is based on the existential-humanistic work with couple by Schnarch (1997). He writes, "*Passionate Marriage's* backbone theory *(differentiation)* says that well-differentiated adults don't need much prodding to change in needed ways" (Schnarch, p. 17). It may be obvious by now that one cannot use differentiation in psychotherapy without working on the existential notion of existing with and apart from other human beings. What separates existential-humanistic work from traditional psychotherapy may be the in-the-moment processing that holds both ends of the paradox. This is especially true in romantic relationships.

It has been enlightening to learn how sexual intimacy and potential can be a vehicle to work with differentiated intimacy and other aspects of relationship, as well as to cultivate human potential (Schnarch, 1997). Moreover, working with couples using

differentiation can often be an existential humanistic process. This is because the intimate setting provides a stage to work with the inevitable human challenges of life. These are the existential humanistic givens in life (M. Heery, PhD., MFT, *personal communication,* International Institute for Humanistic Studies, Unearthing the Moment, Course 1, July 8-10, 2005), which can emerge in an intimate relationship:

1. The human condition is both individual and in relationship with others, this means that we exist separate from, and together with, our partners. This is working with individuation and mutuality in a relationship.
2. We are constantly faced with choice. In this context, each individual must realize his or her personal responsibility for the choices that he or she makes.
3. We are faced with loss when we commit to a relationship with another human being. This will happen as a result of the death of one's own body, that of one's partner, or simply the end of the relationship—whichever comes first.

All of these existential components of an intimate relationship, whether they are realized or not, are likely to cause some sort of anxiety that in some way contributes to their "problems."

Therefore, it appears essential in the process of doing therapy with a couple, that some psycho-education take place at some point, in order to shed come light on the complex nature of a relationship. It may not be necessary to dive deep into the existential nature of their relationship. However, the notion of personal responsibility and choice should likely be mentioned, especially because of the mutual self-empowerment that can occur as a result. In addition, a therapist would do well to educate a couple on the paradoxical separate-together dynamic that exists in any relationship, which both parties

have likely felt, but not fully realized. This would contribute to another notion that often goes hand in hand with differentiation, that is, self-validation. Self-validated intimacy (Schnarch, 1997) gives individuals in relationship the power to disagree without hindering growth, both individual and communal. It is a testament to the notion that intimacy is being real with one another, and to the idea that a partner who will *always* agree or validate one's experience is a myth (Schnarch). For this reason, couples in therapy should learn about self-soothing.

Existential-humanistic therapy can be a great opportunity to create some healthy space between two partners, even if only to facilitate communication. A counselor could utilize various techniques in order to do this, such as guiding clients in communicating positive comments to each other and voicing complains to the therapist to facilitate partner alliance. Another tool is for each partner to alternate roles as speaker and listener, and/or simply to enforce "I" statements in order to cultivate personal responsibility.

It would be interesting, and likely helpful, to work with the physical distance between a couple in order to help them move along relational stages (Bader & Pearson, 1988). Although this was not included in this writer's training in couple's therapy at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (ITP), it was a part of the somatic training. Hence, it could be non-sexual way for a couple to embody differentiation. This could look like partners taking steps towards or away from each other, which would set the stage for them to talk about their need for that particular distance, feelings, and realization of separateness. The aforementioned conscious movement technique is a derivation of Katherine Hendricks's "Relationship Dance" (Hendricks, 1997), a body-centered psychotherapy. Embodied techniques, such as those of Schnarch (1997) and Hendricks

are worthy or more exploration for couples as they create an exiting therapeutic environment, and foster existential-humanistic depth and integration of the behavioral, somatic, and cognitive work that often takes place in couple's therapy

Conclusion

In closing, existential humanistic psychotherapy can be utilized in working with families, children, and couples in both professional and personal spheres. Specifically, focusing on living and relating as an individual apart from others and in mutuality as a part of a relational context serves as a gateway to deepening existential-humanistic processes in psychotherapy. It can deepen growth and intimacy in everyday relationships, should one chose to do so. In fact, doing existential-humanistic psychotherapy may require a personal commitment to its inherent philosophy. One must live and model in the moment in order to create a space that allows others to do so and thereby actualize their self-potential.

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