

Existential Counselling Strategy as A Platform for National Development Through the Nigerian Educational Setting

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Abstract

This paper look at existential counselling as being embedded in the theory itself; which melds theology, philosophy, psychiatry and psychology involved in a tremendous effort to understand human behaviour and emotions. Thus, existential Counselling is to assist the individual to find a meaning for his existence. It is assumed that the search for meaning in life is the central goal of human existence and that most forms of human psychological dysfunctions are due wholly or in part to man's inability to find meaning for his life. The belief is that once the individual finds a meaning to his existence, he would be able to bear the suffering, problems and difficulties peculiar to human existence. This should be done by counsellors through qualities of honesty or authenticity and also by counsellors entering the world of clients and participating with them in its realities. Existentialists' view of human nature was discussed in concepts like the will to meaning, being, freedom, time, anxiety and guilt etc. Counselling strategies that can ensure national development were discussed fully and recommendations suggested include that existential counselling should instill in individuals the belief and understanding that every man is responsible for his acts, inculcate in people the belief that man can predict his physical universe and make his life happier by facing reality, kindling the passion that each man should aid others or try to understand their feelings.

Introduction

The philosophy of existential counselling is embedded in the theory itself which melds theology, philosophy, psychiatry and psychology involved in a tremendous effort to understand human behaviour and emotions. The theory – which pre-dates Freud's Psychoanalytic therapy and found itself at the productive period of philosophical thought – is a philosophical as well as literary movement with roots from Søren Kierkegaard, a nineteenth century Danish philosopher and theologian. His works treat the relationships among human kind, the universe and deity.

His theory was further represented by Jean Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, Gordon Allport, Rollo May etc. The emphasis in this theory is that psychology and psychiatry should be directed towards growth of human potentialities and not mental illness. Thus, May (1958) cited many factors responsible for resistance to existential theory. Among these, is the assumption that older therapies are sufficient to explain human nature and all that is needed is to sketch the details. Secondly, existentialism is seen as representing an encroachment of philosophy on psychiatry and psychology; eroding disciplines regarded as sciences.

Existentialists feel that man is a dynamic process who is always becoming. Man is a being in existence and not a being in essence. Man is totally free and responsible for acts and actions; man is becoming, man is searching, man is thinking and feeling, man is growing and choosing goals. Each person must learn to act as a free person rather than as a part of a crowd. There is need to produce a human being that is harmoniously balanced e.g. balanced enough to face examinations, calm enough to face life struggles and problems and confident enough to find a center of strength within self (Bulus, 1998).

Thus, the major concern of Existential Counselling is to assist the individual to find a meaning for his existence. It is assumed that the search for meaning in life is the central goal of human existence and that most forms of human psychological dysfunctions are due wholly or in part to man's inability to find meaning for his life. The belief is that once the individual finds a meaning to his existence, he would be able to bear the suffering, problems and difficulties peculiar to human existence (Salawu and Abdulkadir, 2011).

Existentialists' Concept/View of Human Nature

Existentialism sees a man as a meaningful whole with a meaningful goal for living. The healthy individual, according to existentialism, is open to reality and he uses this to create

meaning for himself. Existentialism sees man as a unique and dynamic being, who has the freedom to create his own nature and the responsibility to face the reality of his existence. To the existentialists, man is a “past and future-experiencing being” that must be treated with dignity. However, this essentially humanistic view of human nature does not fail to recognize and acknowledge certain inherent natural weakness of man. Existentialists believe that man sometimes needs assistance to withstand the buffets of life, as man has no claim to omniscience. Secondly, man’s freedom to choose and determine his nature must be within the limits of the “thrownness” (aspects of life beyond the control of man) of life. However, this notwithstanding, the individual still has choice to accept or reject the ‘thrown’ aspects of his existence.

To further illustrate the existentialists’ view of human nature the following concepts were examine by writers like Salawu and Abdulkadir (2011) and Bulus (1998):

1. **The Will to Meaning.** The existentialists’ view of human nature could not be well understood without explaining the role accorded to the “Will of Meaning” in existentialists’ therapies. Illustrating the primary of the “will to meaning” in human existence, Victor Frankl (1964:163) submits “Man’s search for meaning is a primary force in his life and not a “secondary rationalization” of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance that will satisfy his own will to meaning”. Once Man is able to satisfy the quest for meaning in his life, he is then able to function adaptively. That perhaps explains why Man is able to live and even die for the sake of his ideals and values. When Man’s natural quest for meaning is blocked, existential frustration sets in.
2. **Being.** Being is one’s awareness of who one is, the individual’s definition of self, what one makes of self. Existentialism sees man’s existence as a process of being and

becoming, and unless one seeks to understand man's unique being one cannot grasp the rationale behind man's overt conduct. The healthy individual is open to reality and creating meaning. The obvious form of non-being is death. However, the real therapeutic issue of non-being focuses on life, non-being represented by total conformity, absorption by collective society – in short, loss of uniqueness and individual identity. Man's "being" or existence could be explained in three perspectives:

- i) Physical being or existence itself. This refers to the specifically human mode of being; the obvious form of non-being in this perspective is physical death,
- ii) the meaning of being or existence,
- iii) being or becoming in terms of the striving to find a concrete meaning in personal existence. Here, another form of non-being which is spiritual in nature could result from lack of meaning in personal existence.

To get out of "existential frustration" man must evoke his inalienable right to freedom of choice and decision.

3. **Freedom.** Existentialists see man as becoming, as having a choice and will, and, therefore, as exercising freedom (Shertzer and Stone, 1980). To the existentialists, man is free in a free world. Arbuckle (1965) opines that although determinism may be part of world, it does not apply to man. The free man lives within the laws of his culture, if he lives in a relatively 'free' culture, but he is not bound by them. They do not control him, but, rather, his 'self' transcends them. Thus in essence, man is free to decide what he wants his existence to be. He is free to act upon his environment and take a stand towards living. To the existentialists, man is a balanced creature with both passion and intellect.

4. **Time.** Minkowski as cited in Bulus (1998) asserts that distorted attitudes toward the future brought manifestations and not that delusion prevented the individual from relating to the future. One can project oneself backward and forward in time and so, able to transcend the present and act react in these dimensions. According to him, people can become disturbed or anxious they come to believe that they do not have a future. Shertzer and Stone (1980) show that the future rather than the present or past is the most dominant mode of time. Thus, to them, personality is best understood as a projection of the individual's future. The explorations into the immediate future mold the individual in constructive ways.
5. **Transcending the Immediate Situation.** Humans can climb over or beyond their immediate situation. They can stand out and through abstract thinking, project what they can be.
6. **Anxiety and Guilt.** To existential theorists, both concepts are central in understanding existence. May (1958) feels that anxiety is the experience of the threat of imminent non-being. Shertzer and Stone (1980) reflecting on his position assert that there are three characteristics of ontological guilt. These are:
 - i) Because people never really fulfill their potentialities, everyone thus feels guilt.
 - ii) Guilt is not totally culturally determined through failure to meet the demands of society's rules; rather it stems from the realities of choice – choice of one behaviour precludes the choice of another.
 - iii) Ontological guilt differs from neurotic guilt in that it is a condition of existence. It is a constructive force in human personality which leads to humility, sensitivity in personal relationships and creative utilization of one's potentialities.

Theoretical Approach of Existential Counselling

Despite their essential humanistic conception of human nature, existentialists do not fail to acknowledge that man often needs assistance in his bid to live adaptively. This lucidly infers that man's nature and the realities of life often predispose him to seek counselling assistance. Thus, the major concern of Existential Counselling is to assist the individual to find a meaning for his existence. It is assumed that the search for meaning in life is the central goal of human existence and that most forms of human psychological dysfunctions are due wholly or in part to man's inability to find meaning for his life. The belief is that once the individual finds a meaning to his existence, he would be able to bear the suffering, problems and difficulties peculiar to human existence (Salawu and Abdulkadir, 2011).

Dreyfus (1964) expresses that clients seek for counselling in order to expand their psychological world in one way or the other. Thus, concluding that the client's world is unique and must be understood if assistance can be rendered to them. The client's uniqueness must be understood. The problem of the client may therefore be only a socially acceptable excuse to obtain help, the real problem being a threat to the individual's being and uniqueness. Consequently, the counsellor encourages the client to disclose his being, his personal uniqueness and the totality of his experiential world, so that both of them can understand it and act upon the possibilities inherent in it. Counsellors must therefore, encourage clients to unfold their world in the counselling encounter so that both can begin to understand it. The 'past' of the client is not essential rather it is the present that must be understood.

Ofman as cited in Bulus (1998) asserts that the counselling relationship is that of "engaged encounter". The tactics he emphasized is that the clients assumes a 'falsely-safe'

omnipotence, take control and be willing to see that they exist in the world and other people are free entities in their own right. He further advocates that the healing be based on mutuality, a conclusion that the person is the way he is and that there is a unifying underlying meaning to his existence, a meaning that he chooses to hold onto in the face of the attendant aversive consequences.

Honesty or authenticity is essential in the relationship. Counsellors should therefore expose themselves and not see clients as objects to be manipulated or exploited. Counsellors must be humane in order to help clients become aware of similar qualities in themselves. Through this, clients will realize their potentialities and achieve self-growth.

Counsellors must enter the world of clients and participate with them in its realities. The encounter according to Vaughan (1965) is to foster freedom within clients, improve their encounters with others and to discover meaning for their existence. Counsellor's techniques are flexibly designed to help clients reveal their existence. Counsellor's presence is to make the existence of clients real. Knowledge and insight are presumed by the theorists as following commitment.

Existential Counselling Strategy for National Development

Existential Counselling has good prospects for the improvement of counselling practices in Nigeria. The significance attached to assisting clients to find the meaning in their lives by existential counsellors is very relevant to the realities of life in our society. The approach of exploring the meaning of life and existence will provide a framework for people to face problems as they occur to them. For instance some people often get worried when much demand is placed on them in their work places. So, encouraging them to understand why they are in such jobs would make them face such difficulties with competence. At times they will find themselves

in conflicts with leaders for one reason or the other. Therefore, such a misunderstanding can be avoided when they are given the democratic freedom of selecting their own leaders bearing in mind that whatever the outcome; they are bound to be responsible for their actions.

The economic difficulties of our nation and the social complications inherent in their contacts with western civilizations have greatly predisposed our citizen to developing feeling of apathy in life. The threat of meaninglessness in life has become so visible that everybody seems to be on guard. The economic difficulties, caused by the worldwide recession and our government's economic programmes, seem to have made life a bit more difficult for the average Nigerian. The school system is also affected. The average Nigerian pupil is now made to pay for his education, only to finish discovering that the education he paid for could not guarantee him employment. In such circumstances, the threat of meaninglessness and futility of life is very rife. The very high rate of unemployment amongst school products is doing a lot of damage to the Nigerian educational system. Without job-market value, any educational training programme loses a central component in its meaning/structure. Nigerian students should be assisted by existential counsellors to develop a 'why' for their 'education' wider than the conventional 'why' of seeking education exclusively for its job-value. The traditional perspective of viewing educational qualifications as meal tickets must be corrected, if the Nigerian educational system is to survive the threat of meaninglessness confronting it. The work of existential counsellors being specially related to assisting people to find meaning in their "being" and "deeds" is very relevant in this context. The meaning structure that the average Nigerian pupil gives to his education should be expanded to include values other than employment. Thus, values such as self-reliance, self-improvement and economic independence should be introduced to the Nigerian pupil. The

existential counsellors will be of immense practical usefulness in this value re-orientation exercise.

Using this strategy, students can be encouraged to develop a method of solving problems not only in school, but in other matters concerning relationship. Most often people make friends today and break such friendship tomorrow. So, they can be helped to identify those qualities they want in friends so that they can freely make realistic choice.

Furthermore, the emphasis that existential counsellors place on freedom of choice is very relevant to the Nigerian educational system. Since the curricula provisions of the Nigerian educational system have been substantially diversified, freedom of choice becomes very pertinent, if the uniqueness of the child is to be respected. Thus, the operational philosophy of the existential counsellor which emphasizes the primacy of the client's uniqueness and freedom of choice is much in tune with the aims and objectives of the Nigerian educational system.

It should also be acknowledged that the level of sophistication of existential counselling in terms of techniques fits into the scheme of things in Nigeria. Existential counselling, unlike other orthodox therapies requires no competencies on the part of the counsellor in such technicalities as test administration and scoring, profiling assessment procedures, etc. rather than competencies in these areas, existential counselling emphasizes the operational "attitudes" of the therapists within counselling. The operational "attitudes" emphasized such as empathy, honesty, authenticity in counsellor-client interaction fit perfectly into the "humanistic" tradition of interpersonal relationship in Nigerian societies. It is perhaps easier to teach the acquisition of these attitudes than to teach the acquisition of specific competencies. Thus, in terms of sophistication of techniques, the sparse emphasis of existential counselling on practical technique and its heavy emphasis on counselors' attitudes are much in tune with the developing status of

counselling practice in Nigeria. The adoption of such relatively simple style of therapy stands a better chance for success in developing societies like Nigeria. The need for counselling hard and soft ware in counselling therapies such as trait-factor, behavioural counselling is totally non-existent in existential therapy. It is only such a cost effective style of counselling that is needed in the austere period.

Moreover, since the strategy is more applicable to students who are more matured enough to rationally think before taking a decision, giving complete freedom of choice to such students may produce the desired result as many would tend to take advantage of such an opportunity.

Conclusion and Recommendation

On the whole, counsellors should carry the search for meaning of life outside the school setting. The threat of futility of human existence hovers over most people. The menaces of insecurity, caused by the economic hardship initiated by worldwide economic depression, make the existential thrust of assisting people to discover the “why” of their existence very pertinent. The current atmosphere of job dissatisfaction, insecurity, apathy to life and work pervading the Nigerian public service could only be rectified if people outside the school setting are given the existential assistance of finding the meaning and structure of their existence. Thus, upon all that has been discussed, the following recommendations are put forward:

1. Existential counselling should instill in individuals the belief and understanding that every man, not mentally incompetent, is responsible for his acts. Thus, people should own up and take responsibilities of actions committed because man creates his nature by choice.
2. Existential counselling should inculcate in people the belief that though man can do little to change most of the physical universe, he can predict it and make his life happier by

facing reality. The goal is to assist individuals to bear problems of life and to seek happiness and individual fulfillment better. Choice is fact of human existence within the surrounding, determinism applies only to physical laws.

3. Existential counselling should kindle the passion that each man should aid others or try to understand their feelings, for mankind is left alone in an uncaring world. Thus, man should act toward others as he would want them to act towards him and man be treated with dignity; his status as a past and future experiencing being because it is cruel not to try to benefit others, they are involved with us in life.
4. Man's suffering can be relieved by suggestions from those who have travelled the road before, or a road like it. Thus, we should learn from others and from the history of humanity. Avoiding pitfalls that had been of the bitterest tastes and following the same trails that have proven of benefit.

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