

TO SAY “YES” TO ONESELF: EXISTENTIAL-ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE ON AUTONOMY

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Abstract

Psychotherapeutic practice calls for creating conceptions of autonomy, which can be utilized in work with clients. This article focuses on the psychotherapeutic approach called “existential analysis and logotherapy” and makes explicit its ideas regarding autonomy. Specifically, the three key theoretical underpinnings of understanding and development of one’s autonomy are described. It is shown that existential-analytical practice is guided by the notions of “person”, dialogue/relatedness and phenomenology. The structural model of autonomy on the basis of existential analysis is discussed. It is argued that, although traditionally autonomy is strongly associated with the third fundamental motivation — the motivation to “be oneself” — this position is insufficient for practice. Thus, the central argument of the paper is that, from a structural perspective, the most useful way to address the issue of autonomy is to consider it as the interplay of the four fundamental existential motivations, described by A. Längle. Therefore, the process of maintaining autonomy includes four different kinds of affirmation. The person says “yes” to his or her subjective reality, own feelings, uniqueness and distinctiveness, and agentive presence in others and in the world. The paper also provides illustrations from psychotherapeutic practice to justify this standpoint.

Keywords: autonomy, existential psychotherapy, existential analysis and logotherapy, self.

Introduction

There is an enormous diversity among psychologists on the issue of autonomy. Some researchers argue that autonomy is an illusion and reveal

automaticity of higher mental processes (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Bargh & Ferguson, 2000). Others understand self as simply a socially constructed concept, and insist that the sense of self and

autonomy is a set of positions within social networks (Auerbach, 1985; Cox & Lyddon, 1997; Richert, 2002). However, these perspectives provide little support for psychotherapy, which traditionally considers the development of one’s autonomy as both a key aim and an effective means of therapeutic change (van Deurzen, 2002; Cooper, 2003; Längle, 2000, 2008; McWilliams, 1994; Meekums, 2006; Rogers, 1951, 1957; Spinelli, 2001, 2005, 2007; Yalom, 1980). Thus, the useful (for practice) concept of autonomy is required. This article focuses on existential-analytical ideas regarding autonomy and reflects upon their application in psychotherapy and counseling. Specifically, the central argument of this paper is that the development of autonomy is the interplay of the four fundamental existential motivations.

The first part of the article briefly reviews the history and the content of existential analysis and logotherapy. Its key propositions concerning autonomy are outlined in the second part, then, in more detail, the structural model of autonomy is presented and illustrated with examples from psychotherapeutic practice.

Existential Analysis and Logotherapy: Overview

Existential analysis and logotherapy is an approach developed within the existential tradition in psychotherapy and counseling. It was derived from V. Frankl’s ideas (Frankl, 1984, 1988) by his follower A. Längle (Längle, 2000, 2008, 2011, 2012; Längle & Kriz, 2012).

Längle defines it as a phenomenological and “person-oriented” form of psychotherapy and counseling, which

helps an individual to form an authentic constant dialogue with the world and with his/herself, and, in doing so, to come to life with “inner consent” (Längle, 2012). As in Frankl’s teaching, in this approach the search for meaning is considered to be one of the person’s deepest and primary motivations. However, phenomenological investigations of human existence conducted by Längle and his colleagues have revealed other sources of activity that precede the motivation of meaning (Längle, 2011, 2012). The results of these phenomenological investigations were summarized in a structural model of the *four fundamental existential motivations*, which differs significantly from original Frankl’s standpoint.

According to Längle, a person’s activity is structured in four main dimensions: finding a basis for living in the world; establishing a relationship to life; being oneself through maintaining identity and authenticity; and, finally, the creative developing of “becoming” (Längle, 2008, 2011, 2012). Let’s examine each of these dimensions more closely.

The first fundamental motivation deals with the question of physical and spiritual presence in the world (“I am — can I be?”). It corresponds with the horizon of the possible and real: current circumstances, both external and internal conditions. At this level, a person makes efforts to maintain protection, space and support from others with the purpose of strengthening their ability “to be”. Disturbances at this dimension declare themselves through anxiety/fear and psychotic disorders (Längle, 2012).

The second fundamental motivation addresses the question of the quality of

one's presence in the worlds ("I am — do I like it?"). The person has a concern not only in the horizon of the possible, but also in that of the valuable. At this level, he or she is occupied by human nature in its vitality and works on the attitude toward life. To experience the value of their life, the person needs relationships, time and closeness to the values. Failures at this dimension manifest themselves in depression (Ibid.).

The third fundamental motivation refers to the questions of authenticity and justice ("I am — how I can be myself in relationships with others?") and thus corresponds with the horizon of the ethically acceptable. At this level, the person delineates and appreciates what constitutes their uniqueness and the uniqueness of others. Hence, this dimension opens up opportunities for personal encounters with other people. The ability to esteem one's own worth is initially based on attention, justice and recognition received from others. If this motivation is disturbed, different histrionic symptoms and personality disorders occur (Ibid.).

The fourth fundamental motivation focuses on the question of meaning ("I am — what do I live for?"). From an existential-analytical perspective, the person can really fulfill themselves in meaningful actions. It corresponds with a wider tradition of existential thinking; for instance, with I. Yalom's idea that every real choice involves actions in the world (Yalom, 1980). The first three fundamental motivations may be considered as a kind of preparation for these meaningful actions and, therefore, precede "the will to meaning". "This dimension of existence deals with our inherent desire to

turn our contributions to life into a meaningful whole; to become fruitful in life" (Längle, 2012, p.167). At this level the person expresses their authentic position in a wider context of life to develop a preferred and more valuable future. Disturbances at this level take the forms of an "existential vacuum" (Frankl), suicidal behavior and addictions (Längle, 2012).

Of course, these motivations are interrelated and can be separated only artificially for practical and didactic reasons. In psychotherapy and counseling, the theory of the four fundamental motivations is used for structural diagnostics and conceptualization of an individual case, and also for elaborating a therapeutic strategy. Some additional details of this theory will be discussed in the section about the development of autonomy, while the key existential-analytical propositions regarding the autonomy will be addressed in the next section.

Existential-Analytical Perspective on Autonomy

We argue that the *three interrelated key principles underlie the way an existential-analytical practitioner addresses the issue of autonomy in his or her psychotherapeutic practice*. They are: *the notion of "person"; phenomenology; and the idea of relatedness/dialogue*.

Developing one's autonomy is a central theme in existential psychotherapy and counseling (van Deurzen, 2002; Längle, 2000; Spinelli, 2005, 2007; Valle, 1978; Yalom, 1980). From the existential-analytical perspective, autonomy is primarily based on the spiritual power — the source of decisions, freedom and responsibility — called

"person", in Längle's terminology (Längle, 2000, 2008). Although it cannot be fixed or "located", it reveals itself through resonance with different aspects of life. The very possibility of "being oneself" and creating the self are embedded in this spiritual dimension, in one's "essence". Thus, the development of autonomy implements the *reunion of the I/self with the "person", which enables authentic positioning and responsible actions and leads to a life with "inner consent"*.

The idea of "free will", despite its attractiveness, is challenging in respects of the uncertainty and anxiety that it brings. Although human freedom is limited, its comprehension leads to a considerably unstable and complicated conception of oneself and others. If clients accept this notion, they discover themselves and others as a process of constant change, as a flow of feelings, desires, impulses, positions and identities, which they cannot entirely control or manipulate. This unsteadiness of human beings increases their anxiety and requires specific attitudes towards themselves and others. Since this spiritual dimension cannot be explained or fixed, it must be understood through the means of *phenomenology* (Längle, 2011, 2012; Luginbühl-Schwab, 2008).

According to existential analysis, one of the key characteristics of the "person" is a state of constant dialogue with the world and with itself. This brings us to the third theoretical underpinning, which guides existential-analytical practice concerning autonomy — *dialogue/relatedness*. As another existential thinker, E. Spinelli, stated:

Viewed from an existential standpoint, questions of choice, freedom and responsibility cannot be isolated or contain-

ed within some separate being (such as 'self' or 'other'). In the inescapable interrelationship that exists between 'a being' and 'the world', each impacts upon and implicates the other, each is defined through the other and, indeed, each 'is' through the existence of the other. Viewed in this way, no choice can be mine or yours alone, no experienced impact of choice can be separated in terms of 'my responsibility' versus 'your responsibility', no sense of personal freedom can truly avoid its interpersonal dimensions" (Spinelli, 2001, p. 16).

In practice it results in a shift from the purpose of "gaining autonomy" to the task of understanding how existing relationships support and block one's autonomy, and maintaining a more balanced stance towards it (through development of the client's inner and external dialogue). For example, when "Ann" (aged 29) came to psychotherapy, her will to maintain autonomy frightened her. Our phenomenological investigation revealed that she was torn between her desire to develop her autonomy and the reaction of her family to it. In particular, Ann's grandmother not only threatened that she would die but also literally suffered a serious relapse of her chronic disease every time the client showed the signs of her independence. In reaction, the whole family blamed and reproached Ann for being selfish. During our sessions the client analyzed this complicated situation and made efforts to take her personal position towards it. Her first position taken in psychotherapy was that she continued to "care for her family" from the standpoint of choice. Although Ann's behavior didn't significantly change, her attitudes towards it

and her feelings became completely different. Subjectively, she was liberated and, thus, felt herself be more autonomous.

All these principles are used in one of the main methods of work in existential analysis and logotherapy — in personal existential analysis (PEA), created by Längle (Längle, 2000). In particular, the method reinforces the “person” by strengthening or restoring their authentic dialogue with themselves and with the world. The psychotherapist invites the client to undertake phenomenological investigation of his or her experience: the practitioner tends to help the client to better recognize reality and his or her feelings, to take up their personal position and carry out authentic actions. Therefore, personal existential analysis may be considered as a procedural model of the development of autonomy.

The Development of Autonomy: Structural Model

Traditionally, in existential analysis and logotherapy the issue of autonomy is strongly associated with the third fundamental existential motivation (the motivation “to be oneself”) (Längle, 2008, 2012). We would like to argue further that *it is useful for the psychotherapist or counselor to consider it as the interplay, or combination, of all the four fundamental motivations*. Implicitly this idea is presented in PEA, but for practical reasons it is useful to make it explicit. Let’s pay closer attention to it.

The content of the *third fundamental motivation* deals with the core of autonomy. At this level, the client delineates and appreciates his or her uni-

queness, takes up personal positions and, in doing so, enables his or her autonomy. By paying attention, being fair, and showing genuine appreciation for the clients, the psychotherapist encourages them to “be themselves”, to deepen their inner dialogues and to develop personal attitudes towards themselves. These “personal attitudes” include delineation in both external and internal relationships. The external delineation means that the clients draw their personal boundaries with others, define and take their responsibility; stand up for their rights, express their authentic positions in actions, etc. The internal delineation refers to a wide range of activity that takes place in private: from decreasing self-criticism and obtaining a more understanding/phenomenological perspective on themselves, to acknowledgment of their own limitations from the standpoint of choice. Thus, the task is to appreciate their uniqueness and to say “yes” to their “persons” (Längle, 2000, 2008).

However, at other times the clients may face difficulties in finding or holding onto an authentic position, which are rooted in other fundamental motivations.

Quite often it happens due to disturbances at the level of the *second fundamental motivation*, when the clients cannot make choices *on the basis of their experienced values*. From a phenomenological perspective, which, as has been stated above, underlies the existential-analytical practice, lived experiences are the immediate outcome of the interrelationship between the client and “the world”. The being affects him or her in the form of immediate impression, which consists of primary emotionality, spontaneous impulse, and

phenomenal content (Längle, 2011). In accordance with M. Scheler’s (Scheler, 1973) ideas, existential analysis and logotherapy considers feelings and emotions as a subjective connotation of values and an important way of perceiving reality. Moreover, lived experience is a *pre-reflective form of personal positions* (Stankovskaya, 2014) *and of autonomy/personal agency*. Thus, to develop autonomy, a person needs to “turn to” his or her lived experience, to maintain sufficient closeness with their own feelings to be able to integrate them through negotiating with a wider value system and conscience.

This capacity of “turning to” lived experience may be violated in relationships with others. Sometimes clients are confused about their relationships with significant others to the degree that they cannot distinguish or freely experience their own feelings. Often they are paradoxically overwhelmed by their own affects and unable to understand them at the same time. So it was for “Kate” (27), who felt “constrained” and frustrated but could not connect this with her life circumstances. During our psychotherapeutic sessions, she discovered that these affects manifested her desire for separation from her parents and for having more “space” for herself in her own life. She found herself guilty of having such a desire, and it took her some time to develop a more favorable position towards her autonomy.

When dealing with difficulties at the level of second fundamental motivation, the psychotherapist’s task is to affirm the feelings of the client in the way they present themselves. It, in turn, helps the client to say “yes” to their feelings and to “turn to” lived

experiences in an attempt to develop their autonomy.

The development of one’s autonomy may be also blocked at the level of the *first fundamental motivation*. It may declare itself in clinical symptoms of reality testing disturbances or – in a less dramatic way – *in the fragility of subjective reality*. For instance, clients may easily lose trust in their perception of reality and become disoriented once confronted with the subjective reality of another person. Since they do not know what is “real” for them, the very basis for their autonomy becomes unstable.

As our psychotherapeutic practice has shown, these difficulties often occur in relationships with symbiotic partners and family members, who neglect the reality of boundaries between people, their separateness from each other; or if the clients are exposed to double binds, which also lead to a split in subjective reality. For example, Kate found it difficult to see her mother as an autonomous person and to recognize her actions and intentions; subjectively she was responsible for her mother’s mood and well-being. At the same time, Kate herself was dependent on her mother; sometimes it even looked like she decided that she could trust her parent more than herself. Particularly, if during a heated argument her mother told Kate that she misunderstood something, Kate would become unsure what she really thought about the situation and intended to do. Her disorientation was specific: Kate did not simply doubt whether she had a right to hold her opinion, she lost trust in her subjective reality and was unable to comprehend what exactly constituted her opinion.

To restore the basis of autonomy at the level of the first fundamental motivation, the psychotherapist clarifies and affirms what is real for the client. Thus, the aim of the psychotherapeutic intervention is to encourage the clients to hold on to their subjective reality in the face of confrontation with other people; to help them to say “yes” to the horizon of subjective experience of the possible and the real.

According to existential analysis and logotherapy, the development of autonomy is one of the deepest and primary motivations of the person (Längle, 2012). Moreover, it acquires additional subjective value since it “opens” the person to the world by increasing their capacity to self-transcendence and meaningful actions: Maintaining one’s autonomy becomes the means of fruitful integration and cooperation with others. This brings us to the concept of “*personalization*”, developed by the Russian psychologist V. Petrovskiy (Petrovskiy, 2010, 2013). As he pointed out, people want not only to be seen by the other and establish personal exchange with them; they also try to expand their virtual presence for the other in a very specific way – to become an *agentive “presence”* that evokes and inspires *significant actions* by the other. From that perspective, if the client fails to be reflected by the other in this agentive way, it blocks the development of their autonomy at the level of the fourth fundamental motivation. It happened to Michael (40), when people did not find his business project interesting. For him, this project was both a continuation of his personality and a way to cooperate with others. The rejection

made him doubt if his individuality was a worthwhile and fruitful basis for integration into society and, thus, weakened his autonomy. The task of the *level of the fourth fundamental motivation*, therefore, is to find and say “yes” to the traces of the client’s agentive presence in his or her significant others and in the world.

Summing up, the structural phenomenological model of development of one’s autonomy embraces all four fundamental existential motivations described by Längle. From the perspective of the client, it is a combination of four different types of affirmation: “yes” to his or her subjective reality, to their own feelings, to their uniqueness and distinctiveness, and to an agentive presence in others.

Conclusion

Some existential-analytical ideas regarding autonomy were discussed in this article. The three key theoretical underpinnings of understanding one’s autonomy in existential-analytical psychotherapy and counseling were revealed: the notion of “person”, dialogue/relatedness and phenomenology. The existential-analytical structural model of autonomy was presented. Specifically, it was argued that, from a structural perspective, it is useful to consider autonomy as the interplay of the four fundamental existential motivations defined by A. Längle. The process of maintaining one’s autonomy was described as taking up the four personal positions: “yes” to subjective reality, to one’s own feelings, to uniqueness and distinctiveness, and to an agentive presence in others.

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Сказать себе «да»: экзистенциально-аналитическое понимание автономии

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Резюме

Психотерапевтическая практика призывает к созданию концепций автономии личности, которые могут эффективно использоваться в профессиональной деятельности психотерапевтов и психологов-консультантов. В статье анализируется одно из психотерапевтических направлений — экзистенциальный анализ и логотерапия — и эксплицируются идеи, определяющие специфику понимания автономии в этом подходе. В частности, приводятся три ключевых теоретических принципа, задающих общую систему рассмотрения и развития личностной автономии; показывается, как идеи о «духовной личности», диалогичности/связанности и феноменологический метод ориентируют практическую деятельность психолога. Описывается структурная модель автономии, опирающаяся на концепцию четырех фундаментальных мотиваций А. Лэнгле. Обосновывается, что, хотя традиционно в экзистенциальном анализе и логотерапии личностная автономия относится к третьей фундаментальной мотивации — мотивации к тому, чтобы «быть собой», с точки зрения практики полезно рассматривать становление этого феномена как взаимодействие всех четырех фундаментальных мотиваций. Демонстрируется, что подобный ракурс позволяет представить процесс укрепления автономии как сочетание четырех видов активности личности по утверждению себя. Так,

в процессе развития автономии личность говорит «да» собственной фактичности, чувствам и эмоциям, собственной уникальности и самобытности, действительному присутствию, или, в терминологии В.А. Петровского, «инобытию» в значимых других и в мире. Предложенная модель иллюстрируется примерами из психотерапевтической практики, разъясняющими и подтверждающими теоретические построения.

Ключевые слова: автономия, экзистенциальная психотерапия, экзистенциальный анализ и логотерапия, самость.