Major Theory Paper

Haley Rasmussen

The University of the Southwest

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Dr. Ashley Nash

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Abstract

This paper examines the theories of Existentialism and Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). Each theory is examined under the seven following lenses: (a) biography and influences, (b) beliefs about human nature, (c) how problems are created and maintained, (d) role of the counselor, (e) role of the client, (f) therapeutic goals, and (g) multicultural considerations. Journal articles, studies, and books by key contributors of each theory were used to provide context for each noted category. Each theory was compared and reflected upon, instilling perspective about how they have transitioned over time, complimented the other techniques, and continue to be used in modern practices.

Introduction

Early religions, such as Buddhism, used the concept of mindfulness as a tool to reach a state of internal peace (Sun, 2014). Over the years the definitions and applications of mindfulness have expanded exponentially, especially in the field of psychology. Two major theories in psychology that use mindfulness to enhance their therapeutic process are Existential Theory and Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). Studies show that mindfulness has proven to be a useful tool for clients who have the goal of slowing down and reflecting inward. Existentialism uses mindfulness as a tool to reflect inward in order to investigate authenticity, discover freedom and responsibility, and accept the givens of life (Yalom, 1980). DBT uses mindfulness as a tool to look inward and recognize meaningful goals, as well as slow down the time between trigger and impulsive action (Ellberger, 2023) and make choices that align with the client's goals (Linehan & Wilks, 2015). This paper will discuss the intricacies of each individual theory, compare where they overlap as well as where they differ, and conclude with my own final thoughts.

Theory I: Existential Therapy

Theorist's Biography and Influences

Unlike many modern-day theories, existential therapy originated as a movement and was influenced by a variety of philosophers. Although glimpses of existential attitude can be seen in the writings of Stoic and Epicurean philosophers of antiquity, for example, the struggle with sin and desire in St. Augustine's *Confessions*, or in the intimate reflections on death and the meaning of life in Michel de Montaigne's *Essays*, the base of existentialism was tied into a foundation by a number of philosophers and writers in the 19th century (Aho, 2023). These philosophers included Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin

Buber, Ludwig Binswanger, and Medard Boss (Corey, 2016). Each philosopher brought a unique piece of the puzzle that would later become what we know as contemporary existential psychotherapy. A major contributor that collected and pieced together parts of that puzzle was Irvin D. Yalom, who narrowed existentialism down to four ultimate concerns of life: death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness (Yalom, 1980).

Existentialism first gained popularity in Europe in the 1940s and 1950s (Corey, 2016). Its popularity gained traction after World War II at which point an entire generation was forced to confront the human condition and the anxiety-provoking givens of death, freedom, and meaninglessness (Aho, 2023). Due to the dramatic circumstances, early existentialism primarily focused on radical acceptance as a practice to cope with what was out of their control in a time that was heavy with tragedy and hardship.

Although the roots of existentialism developed in Europe, there were major contributions to contemporary existential psychotherapy from America and Britain. James Bugental (United States) introduced key factors such as resistance and the existential-humanistic approach; Emmy van Deurzen (Britain) influenced training and the understanding of concepts such as self-searching and the practice of finding meaning in past experiences (Corey, 2016).

Beliefs about Human Nature

When examining existentialism it is important to remember that it is heavily entangled with the humanistic approach, which stresses the human ability to grow and change. With this in mind, existentialism operates from the point of view that a person first exists, then encounters the world, where they then subjectively acquire and define their own authenticity (Sartre, 2022). Simply put, this theory believes that human behavior is learned. The essence of a person is in an irrational plane, where they encounter dramatic circumstances of the world where they are

doomed to be free to determine the meanings of life and the authenticity of their own person (Sartre, 2022). Humans are always encountering new stimuli, and they have the freedom to choose how to react to them. Because humans are always face to face with a changing situation, choice is always a choice in a clearly defined situational context of being (Sartre, 2022). In this context, existentialism in relation to human nature, is a teachable method of action where humans can control their own presence in the world.

How Problems are Created and Maintained

Existentialism can be thought of as a series of therapies because it has been influenced by so many philosophers with varying interpretations. However, there are running themes throughout these variations, usually addressing mindfulness and acceptance around the givens of life/existence. The givens of existence include death, freedom, choice, isolation, and meaninglessness (Yalom, 1980). Existentialism looks at how humans are in relation to the world. However, to understand the phrase "being in the world," properly, one must recognize that being human means being engaged and entangled in a situation, and confronted with a world whose objectivity and reality is in no way detracted from by the subjectivity of that "being" who is "in the world" (Frankl, 1967). Although people have freedom, it is entangled in the givens of existence that create an inherent connectedness among the people of the world.

Existentialism theorizes that once we as humans accept the givens of life, we then harness the freedom to choose how we navigate the world with it. This theory is based on the concept that we, as humans, are free and as a consequence are also responsible for our own actions. Furthermore, freedom is not free-floating; it is invariably bound up in the freedom of others (Aho, 2023). We want freedom for freedom’s sake and in every particular circumstance,

and in wanting freedom we discover that it depends entirely on the freedom of others, and that freedom of others depends on ours (Aho, 2023).

One last note is existentialism has been shown to be effective for people who have been through traumatic events. Arredondo & Caparrós (2023) discussed how their research showed that from an existential psychotherapy perspective, reactions to traumatic events can be both negative and positive for a person. The significance being, that existentialism can help clients open their mind to a broader outlook after experiencing trauma. Additionally, they have suggested that using existential techniques to find meaning and acceptance after a traumatic event is an effective approach (Arredondo & Caparrós, 2023).

Role of the Counselor

Once we understand how existential problems come to exist, it is then the therapist's job to assist clients in their exploration of those challenges. In counselling, existential therapy focuses upon a client's "coming into being", with the emphasis of "being" indicating action (Vickery et al., 2023). As therapists we can help guide our clients in acting authentically, as well as understanding when their actions may be out of that alignment, and challenge them to take responsibility for the outcome. In this role, the counselor promotes awareness and challenges perspectives that can help clients open up to different areas in life and themselves.

The therapist's job is to also help clients explore the givens of existence. They can use tools like radical acceptance, or may look at a client's past to reflect on current behavior. One given of life that is worth drawing specific attention to is death. Yalom (2008) advocated that it is important for therapists to directly address death with clients because it percolates beneath the surface and haunts us throughout life; death is a visitor in the therapeutic process and ignoring its presence can send the signal to clients that it is too overwhelming to explore. Confronting

anxieties like death can help clients explore and accept a more peaceful outlook. They can also use death as a tool to reflect on the quality of their own lives or use it as motivation to use their time in a way that is meaningful to them.

Role of the Client

For a patient working in existential therapy, their main roles are to reflect inward, practice being self-aware, explore and discover, and embrace liberation (Vickery et al., 2023). Clients will experiment with concepts inside the therapeutic setting, but also challenge themselves to experiment with choices in real life as well. One of the main concepts of existentialism is discovering authenticity in the self, and then making choices that reflect that. The purpose behind this supports the thought process that when individuals put in the effort to figure out who they are and how they operate, it can be easier to see how to take responsibility for choices and recognize how those choices align with who they strive to be. Discovering authenticity goes hand in hand with discovering personal values and meaning, which can also help create goals, direction, and connection in life.

Therapeutic Goals

The base of existentialism's therapeutic goals relies on a solid counselor-client connection. This connection is valued because it is important that the client feels safe enough to be honest about how they exist. The therapist then helps the client view their challenges through the lens of internal causation, rather than external causation. When creating goals based off of existentialism, one would aim to look inward in order to find the freedom to control their destiny in the long term. One's goal in this area is also to accept that the anxieties around death, freedom, choice, isolation, and meaninglessness are all conditions of living (Yalom, 1980). To live also comes with freedom. This freedom allows us to choose who we are and take

responsibility for our destiny. When encountering trauma or hard circumstances, the goal of an existential approach is to find acceptance in the situation, investigate how that situation impacts one's authenticity and how to make choices around that, and find meaning (Arredondo & Caparrós, 2023). The givens of life, such as death, can be used as an additional motivation to reflect on life and choose to live in a way that is authentic and meaningful in the time we have been given.

Multicultural Considerations

Existentialism can be a useful tool in multicultural therapy settings because it allows individuals to choose how they would like to grow on a personal level (Corey, 2016). Existentialism can also be useful to invoke a *freedom-from* (oppression) mindset which can lead to psychological liberation and alleviate psychological distress (Vickery et al., 2023). It is worth noting that traditional existentialism contrasts this, as it was criticized for putting too much responsibility on the individual without acknowledging social factors. However modern approaches, such as the existential-integrative approach, are taking more multicultural considerations into account. This is a positive transition in the development of existentialism because "one cannot simply heal individuals to the neglect of the social context within which they are thrust; to be a responsible practitioner, one must develop a vision of responsible social change alongside and in coordination with one's vision of individual transformation"(Corey, 2016).

Theory II: Dialectical Behavior Therapy

Theorist's Biography and Influences

Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) emerged as a trial-and-error clinical effort based on the application of behavioral principles and social learning theory to suicidal behaviors (Linehan

& Wilks, 2015). The theory was headed by Marsha Linehan, who had a diagnosis of schizophrenia and suicidal behavior herself. Although it was not officially diagnosed, Linehan also suspected that she had borderline personality disorder (BPD) as well. In her memoir, Linehan (2021) explained how DBT started as a personal vow to herself to "get out of hell". This vow drove her passion to discover methods that would help not only herself, but many people to come.

Linehan and colleagues started their research on highly suicidal individuals, however in order to continue receiving grants, they were forced to identify a mental health disorder, so they focused their studies on patients who were chronically suicidal who also met criteria for BPD (Linehan & Wilks, 2015). During the studies, they found that techniques like humanism and existentialism were not producing the desired results, so they focused their attention on designing a system that would allow their patients to build a life worth living.

Creating a theory psychologists could follow, that would also not overwhelm the highly sensitive patients they were studying, proved to be difficult. Linehan and colleagues were essentially trying to find a balance between acceptance based therapies and behavior therapy. They eventually found this balance in the philosophical concept of dialectics, which highlights the process of synthesizing oppositions (Linehan & Wilks, 2015). This was the foundation they moved forward with that would become what we know today as dialectical behavior therapy.

Beliefs about Human Nature

DBT is a behavior therapy which means that everything is presumed to be learned, or alternatively, everything is reinforced through positive and negative consequences. DBT specifically puts emphasis on behavioral restructuring rather than cognitive restructuring. The thought behind this being that it is easier to change behavior than it is to change emotions, so if

you make positive changes to behavior, then the ability to regulate emotions will follow. In this context, DBT can be a useful tool for cases that involve personality disorders and addiction where emotions tend to be harder to control and conceptualize than behavior. It is worth noting that typically, a person hits a certain threshold of consequence to be motivated to make change, however it is also possible to achieve behavior change without motivation, if behavior in the surrounding environment changes.

How Problems are Created and Maintained

One of the problems seen through the lens of DBT is impulsive action/negative thinking due to triggers. This can be seen in Linehan's study, where she found that the traditional CBT procedures, that focused on cognitive restructuring, were challenging the empirical and logical validity of her borderline clients' beliefs causing them to feel that their emotional pain was discounted as not real, their competency was being attacked, and they were being judged and rejected (Linehan & Wilks, 2015). Alternatively, Linehan started focusing on skilled mindfulness, where clients would work on skills to self-soothe and manage stress. She acknowledged that the client's emotional experience, valid or not, was causing them pain and met it with radical acceptance (Jennings & Apsche, 2014). The key to this concept was to be with the emotion in the immediate moment, but use mindfulness to accept feelings without making negative self-judgments.

The inherent modularity of DBT allows for skills to be added, modified, or deleted depending on the curriculum or need (Linehan & Wilks, 2015). Many modern takes on DBT use tools like distress tolerance lists to create space between the immediate emotion and acting out an urge as a response. Diary cards can also be used to track personal patterns and create self-awareness of where in the chain things are causing problems. The key is to train the brain to not

immediately react to an emotion or stimulus so that the client has more time to make better choices; the choices should reflect long term goals. In summary the process the client would go through would reflect the flow of: I think, I feel, my body feels, and I want to do. They can then use mindfulness and self-awareness to imagine their long-term goals and make the choice to act in alignment with them.

Role of the Counselor

The role of the counselor in DBT is to help the client recognize their patterns, practice mindfulness around them, and practice not acting out their urges. Like many other therapies, it is important to maintain a good counselor-client relationship so that clients feel comfortable enough to be open and look inward in order to recognize barriers and create goals that are meaningful to them. The therapist can help the client look inward and realize those goals, and then help them find ways to practice acting in alignment with those goals. When a stimulus upsets the client, the therapist helps them tune into a mindset where they recognize that a certain behavior is not serving them, refocus the action, and make a better choice. That choice may not always be the right choice, and that is okay, the key is to practice those mindfulness skills, because mindfulness is focused awareness, and if there is no mindfulness there is no skillfulness (Ellberger, 2023).

Some DBT therapists use phone coaching sessions in order to apply learned skills and to help clients hold themselves accountable. Therapists also can apply interactive tools such as the distress tolerance lists and the TIP scale. The tip scale stands for (T) Tip your face into cold water- it activates your dive response and acts as a nervous system reset for your body (I) Intense exercise (P) Paced breathing and paired muscle relaxation (Linehan & Wilks, 2015). These tools

are in place to help clients separate impulse from urge, and create time in between them where they can reflect and make better choices.

Role of the Client

During DBT the client has multiple roles. One role the client will need to work on is self-reflection and mindfulness to look at themselves honestly and with intention. During this phase they can get in touch with the process of: I think, I feel, my body feels, and I want to do (Linehan & Wilks, 2015). During this phase of reflection they can discover meaningful goals that they can then use to guide their choices.

Another role that clients can apply this mindfulness to behavior. Clients can practice recognizing when a stimulus affects them and work on creating a space between the stimulus and the impulse. As they get better at creating that space, they can use it to reflect and avoid acting on the undesired behavior. In this phase they can use techniques such as TIP, distress tolerance lists, and opposite action (Linehan & Wilks, 2015). These roles acknowledge that change comes from learning and therefore conditioning, so if the client wants to change, they will have to find a way to provide consequences to reinforce positive and negative behavior.

Therapeutic Goals

DBT is useful for clients who face a wide variety of challenges including personality disorders, suicidal ideation, and addiction. It is based off behavioral therapy that theorizes that behavior is learned through positive and negative reinforcement. When we face an uncomfortable stimulus, typical behavior would be to do the thing that makes that discomfort go away. Those patterns of doing are reinforced, and depending on the stimulus can lead to both positive and negative behaviors. DBT teaches clients how those positive and negative reinforcements can be strategically implemented to shape goal directed behavior (Linehan &

Wilks, 2015). The goal of DBT is to use mindfulness to recognize reactions to stimuli (such as feelings in response to stimuli) and make the choice to respond in a way that reflects the client's goals and values.

Multicultural Considerations

DBT presents multiple strengths in diverse client populations because it is task oriented, focused on objectivity, deals with the present more than the past, and has a problem-solving orientation (Corey, 2016). DBT is widely used all over the world due to its ability to adapt to a variety of specific symptoms and populations.

Although DBT is used by millions around the world, DBT researchers have paid little empirical attention to cultural factors that may influence which parts of the treatment work (or do not work) in cross-cultural settings and non-Western countries (Van Berkel, 2023). These shortcomings include lack of research on how cultural background of participants can affect treatment outcomes and studies that include sociocultural factors of participants in DBT skills groups, which may impact attendance, engagement, skills practice in between sessions (Van Berkel, 2023). Additionally, the second edition of the DBT Skills Manual, published in 2015, does not mention the importance of cultural considerations in treatment outcomes or in clinician competence (Linehan, 2015). This gap in research is a good reminder that although DBT is widely used, the theory falls short when it comes to studies done on effectiveness of DBT in multicultural settings.

Comparison and Reaction

Similarities and Differences

Existential Theory and Dialectical Behavior Theory (DBT) complement each other in a multitude of ways. The core of each theory puts a heavy emphasis on looking inward to develop

meaningful authenticity to one's self. Existential therapy takes the approach that individuals subjectively experience the world to discover authenticity of self through learning, and once that authenticity is discovered, people have the freedom to choose how to act in alignment with it. Similarly, DBT takes the approach that individuals learn through positive and negative reinforcement, and one should create goals authentic to one's self in order to choose how to act in alignment with those goals. The practice of being mindful in order to choose how to act is also a staple in both theories. A slight difference is that existential therapy prioritizes cognitive thought process more than DBT, which puts more emphasis on changing behavior.

An overlapping tool that both theories use, developed by Victor Frankl (1985), is radical acceptance. Radical acceptance practices approaching situations outside of one's control without judgement. It is a form of distress tolerance skill that is focused on reality acceptance, which aims to reduce suffering and increase freedom when painful facts cannot be changed immediately, or ever (Linehan & Wilks, 2015).

Existentialism puts control in the hands of the client so that they can take responsibility for their role in their behavior without putting blame on external factors. Due to this approach of prioritizing the individual, it has been criticized for not acknowledging social factors, however modern approaches have seen improvement on this front. In contrast, DBT acknowledges external factors and is praised for its' adaptability in multicultural settings. The caveat being the small amount of research providing data on its effectiveness in multicultural settings.

Personal Reaction

I value the approach of both existential theory and DBT theory. I enjoy the concept of using mindfulness as a tool to reflect on authenticity and how our own actions intermingle with the concepts around them. Something that caught my eye as I was looking into the research

around these therapies was how they both revolved around the power of choice. In order to make these choices, these theories put a heavy emphasis on the skill set to slow down to a place where clients could be mindful about making those choices, implying that mindfulness was the skill to master. From my perspective, mindfulness is important, but it is only half of the puzzle. The other half is the skill set to be able to make the choice, which I personally felt was overlooked by some of the studies and protocols I reviewed. I saw tools on how to make set choices in order to delay the bad choice, but saw little instruction offered on what goes into the processes of breaking down and choosing how to make an actual decision. This gap is important because sometimes making choices can feel really bad and intimidating, which can affect motivation to slow down and choose. I believe that understanding the *why* and *how* behind making a choice is an important variable to use in tandem with these theories.

I look forward to using techniques from existentialism to help clients understand themselves and discover the freedom they have to take responsibility for what they can control. Additionally, I look forward to using DBT to give clients an actionable outlet that can be used to change behavior without needing to dive into the emotional roots of how they came to be.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the intricacies of each individual theory, compared where they overlapped as well as where they differed, and reviewed my own final thoughts. By investigating each theory individually, the big picture of how each function as a mechanism for serving specific issues was brought to light. Two big influences in both theories are the concepts of mindfulness and acceptance. Building off of these concepts, clients are able to get in tune with choices that can lead to actionable behavior that is authentic to themself and their goals. I personally believe that both of these therapy styles are useful in the therapeutic setting and can

lead to new learned behaviors. One critique I had was that although both of these theories were focused around the power of choice, I felt that they fell short in defining a tangible skill base of *how* to break down and make those choices. Overall, these theories prove to provide useful techniques that empower clients with the means to develop new behavior.

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