An Existential Perspective on the Integration of Coaching and Therapy

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Introduction
For many years existential psychotherapists - such as Van Deurzen (1997), Yalom (1980) or any of the practitioners cited in Cooper’s (2003) overview of the variety of existential approaches to therapy - have engaged with vulnerable clients struggling to cope with life’s challenges. It seems that, more often than other approaches to therapy, they have incorporated, within the overarching framework of existentialism, aspects of different disciplines such as humanistic psychology (Bugenthal, 1978) or psycho-analysis (Frankl, 1984). More recently, an increasing number of coaches (usually working at the opposite end of the spectrum of vulnerability) started to recognize the relevance of existential themes to their clients’ agendas and adopted existential thought and philosophy into their work with highly successful leaders of large corporations (e.g. Hanaway, 2012; or Joplin, 2012), in career coaching (Pullinger, 2012), decision making models (LeBon & Arnaud, 2012) and in combination with many other approaches such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (Mirea, 2012), Neuro-Linguistic Programming (Reed, 2012), Mindfulness (Nanda, 2012), Transactional Analysis (Lewis, 2012) and even in conjunction with psychometric assessment tools such as the Myers-Briggs type indicator of personality (Pringle, 2012). These coaches believe that existential philosophy “can add depth and breadth to any form of coaching” (Van Deurzen & Hanaway, 2012, p.xvi). Working one-to-one with clients from an existential perspective involves working with human lived existence (Cooper, 2003). Coaches and therapists, together with clients, create an exploratory space that facilitates a better understanding of how the individual experiences living and that helps them identify and understand the paradoxes and challenges that life presents. This is a process, in which clients are likely to discover their values and what is important to them, become aware of their perception of how the world works, their possibilities in life and freedom of choice, and discover what they can and cannot change, which encourages them to take responsibility and engage in life as it presents itself more fully. Existential practitioners therefore often work along the whole spectrum of human experience. They embark on a journey with each client, which at times is best fuelled by a therapist and at times may best benefit from a coaching approach. This chapter will explore the integration of coaching and therapy from an existential perspective. By examining similarities and differences of existential approaches to both practices, it will be evaluated to which degree existentialism as a wider framework can be a natural habitat for integration. Consequently, inferences will be made with regards to its compatibility with the personal consultancy model (Popovic and Jinks, this issue).

Setting the stage: An existential perspective on human existence
Existential practitioners acknowledge that all human beings share certain existential givens as a result of merely being alive and in the world with others. These givens are often paradoxes or conflicts between two ends of a polarity. Anxiety arises when we are faced with the dilemmas of our existential givens: we are free to but also condemned to choose whereas every choice excludes many other possibilities; we cannot but constantly try to escape from taking or accepting responsibility for our actions; we naturally try to create or search for
meaning and purpose in a world that ultimately lacks an overarching ‘meaning of life’; we encounter or become aware of death regularly (through illness, danger, birthdays or bereavement) and feel both motivated and paralysed by this awareness; we long for certainty in an uncertain world; and we realise our need for and an inescapability of being-with-others in the world but also realise that, at the same time we are isolated beings and nobody will ever know us fully at any given moment as much as we do.

In essence, we avoid facing many of life’s paradoxical truths in order to make our lives easier, more comfortable and more bearable. However, while it is an effective defence mechanism and does make us feel better on the surface, it is inevitable to get confronted with these truths regularly during our lifetime. We cannot keep living our lives in bad faith (Sartre, 1943). These encounters often lead to a whole battery of consequences (anxiety, depression, paralysis, inability to choose etc), which can easily be labelled as pathology, disorder or illness. However, we also need to acknowledge that we cannot live authentically at all times.

Existential givens are universal and apply to all people, regardless of culture, age, social class, intelligence, or else. It is this universality that makes existential thought a universal philosophy. It is concerned with the questions of what makes us human and how to live life fully in the face of its givens.

Working existentially with clients
When working existentially with clients, the phenomenological method is paramount to the exploration process and allows the practitioner to understand, unpack and reflect back what the client brings into the relationship, and therefore to facilitate learning, discovery and awareness. This process leads to the creation of a strong foundation from which the client is able to engage with life and its inevitable struggles, make difficult decisions, find direction and purpose and hence live more fully and authentically.

In the course of this process, the relationship between client and practitioner is the core component of facilitating lasting change. The practitioner needs to constantly evaluate and shift his or her role as the client goes through phases of questioning and recreating meaning, struggling to cope with his or her personal dilemmas and making concrete plans to face them, resenting and accepting certain givens in his or her life and so on.

For this purpose, client and practitioner create a space together within which clients can safely doubt, ponder, reflect and understand their lives better. What this space (or what happens within it) is called – coaching, therapy or counselling - is merely a matter of definition. Each can be applied within an existential framework.

Coaching, therapy, counselling – Where’s the difference?
Countless approaches to therapy have been established and similarly, coaching has become increasingly difficult to define (Stober & Grant, 2006). While there is little doubt that many niche markets have been created through emphasis on their differences, much of what has been written about the two disciplines in comparison highlights their similarities (Bachkirova & Cox, 2005; Bluckert, 2004; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Popovic & Boniwell, 2007). Coaching has been termed an ally to counselling in the client’s pursuit of wellbeing (Bachkirova & Cox, 2005), “counselling in disguise” (Williams & Irving, 2001, p.3) or just another brand name for counselling work (Carroll, 2003). This seems particularly true for an
existential approach to one-to-one work. Pearl (2011, see Jacob, 2011) has coined existential coaching as ‘therapy through the back door’ in an effort to acknowledge the large overlap into the therapeutic realm and clients’ desire to enter a helping relationship while avoiding the stigma of seeing a therapist (being ill, mad, crazy or having a disorder). Similarly, existential practitioners have called coaching ‘the acceptable face of counselling’ (see Spinelli, 2008; Summerfield, 2006; or Van Deurzen, 2012). As existential psychotherapist and coach Van Deurzen writes:

“Many people wish to tackle existential problems without running the risk of being considered mentally ill or suffering from some kind of personality problem. […] Where individuals seek to gain insight into their own possibilities and limitations without reference to mental health problems, a coaching model is often more appropriate and welcome. This is not to say that counselling and psychotherapy are not related to coaching, for there are many times when there will be a need to cross over from one realm into another.” (Van Deurzen, 2012, p.xvii)

**Existential coaching and existential psychotherapy**

**Commonalities**

Quite some overlap and many commonalities between existential coaching and existential counselling and therapy can be found, as both “rely heavily on ideas and techniques derived from Western philosophical traditions such as Socratic dialoguing, phenomenology, dialectics and logic as well as drawing on Eastern meditative practices” (Van Deurzen & Hanaway, 2012, p.xix). The actual methods of existential coaching have been described as “matching those of existential psychotherapy and counselling practice” (Van Deurzen, 2012, p.11).

**Philosophy and theory**

Both approaches are grounded in existential philosophy and use philosophical methods of helping people to change, improve, cope, live more effectively or otherwise develop. Existential practitioners assume that people, while they may be well able to manage their lives successfully, often long for a stronger sense of purpose. Existential practice allows them to explore the big questions of what it means to be human, how that relates to their reality and how to engage in life more fully through developing the courage to face its many challenges.

**Phenomenology**

The phenomenological mode of inquiry (Husserl, 1925, 1986; Ihde, 1986; Merleau-Ponty, 1962) is the central method to existential practitioners. In contrast to many other methods of inquiry it does not make any assumptions about the client’s experience. By being aware of and bracketing (putting aside) all previous personal biases and assumptions (called Epoché, or ‘tuning in’), the practitioner is able to fully listen to and explore the client’s reality from his or her frame of reference as it presents itself. The focus of the exploration is on description of the client’s experience, rather than explanation thereof or reasons for it. Assumptions and interpretations are constantly verified to check whether we understand the client and his or her meanings correctly. This happens within a spirit of active curiosity rather than critical questioning. The results are a sense of clarity for the client and increased awareness of possibilities and choice so that the client may discover blind spots and distinguish true beliefs from false beliefs. If you find your attention wandering or searching for an explanation or

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3 during first cohort teaching at the New School for Psychotherapy and Counselling in London, where the first and only MA in existential coaching has been established in 2011.
theory, you are not attending to your client phenomenologically (Van Deurzen and Adams, 2011).

Tuning out of the client’s experience, taking a step back and placing it into context (horizontalization, the bridge between Epoché and Verification), provides the client with a new perspective on their presented issue which opens up new channels for learning and change.

### Working with worldview and existential dimensions

In both coaching and therapy, the practitioner is exploring the client’s worldview phenomenologically. Worldview is a person’s interpreted framework of making sense of the world, of others and oneself (see also Jaspers, 1971) and is based on the client’s values, beliefs, purpose and meanings. Exploring a client’s worldview provides great insight into their prevalent dilemmas on existential domains and vice versa. The practitioner may explore the client’s four existential dimensions (Van Deurzen, 1997), namely the physical (being with nature), the personal (being with oneself), the social (being with others) and the spiritual (being with meaning) dimension or client’s experience of death, uncertainty, isolation and meaninglessness (Yalom, 1980). In whichever way approached, an exploration of the client’s worldview frames the foundation from which learning and understanding can take place. What often naturally follows is a greater awareness of the client’s freedom to choose active engagement with life as well as his or her possibilities to do so. In order to work with this method the practitioner requires a certain level of training and set of skills (see next section).

Spinelli, one of the first practitioners to write about existential coaching, summarizes the work with worldviews as follows:

> “The creation of a secure and trustworthy ‘life-space’ encourages clients to get to know more accurately and to experience more honestly just what their worldview is, what it is like to experience oneself and others through that worldview, and how the current dilemmas, concerns and uncertainties that are presenting themselves may be challenges to, or outcomes of, that very same worldview.” (Spinelli, 2005, p.1)

### Skills

In addition to basic skills such as paraphrasing, mirroring, summarizing, questioning assumptions and bracketing one’s own assumptions, working existentially requires a specific set of skills and attitudes, which are comprehensively outlined by Van Deurzen & Adams (2011). Most importantly, the practitioner needs to be able to identify and reflect back characteristics of the client’s worldview and underlying existential themes in the client’s discourse. Also, being able to identify emotions as a compass, guide or as valuable feedback to where the client wants to go as well as drawing into awareness, through phenomenological inquiry, the range of possibilities and choice that a client has, are essential skills for the existential practitioner.

### Supervision

Both, existential therapists and coaches, value supervision as an important source for exploration of one’s own assumptions which gives way to valuable insights into the evolving relationship between practitioner and client and in turn improves the positive effect for the client (Van Deurzen & Young, 2009).

### Differences

While it has been argued that, due of the amount and variety of approaches, coaching and therapy cannot clearly be separated by a temporal perspective (future-, present- or past-
oriented) or by client group (normal vs pathological clients) (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001) existential practice can be differentiated in three aspects:

**Temporality**
Coaching is usually time-limited whereas therapy typically has less established time limits. Existential practitioners are very aware of temporality and the impact of the client’s perception of time on their reality. There is limited time to be spent on this earth and coaches and clients who chose coaching tend to prefer a more goal-focused approach. Therefore, coaches tend to explore the impact of the client’s past on the present in relation to their future goals whereas therapists tend to explore in more depth the context of the client’s past with regards to their current reality. In support of the argument, looking at Bruce Peltier’s (2001) ten guidelines for existential practice in executive coaching all of the guidelines can be applied to existential psychotherapy with the exception of number 5 ‘get going’ which reflects the emphasis on time limitation.

**Degree of exploration (in the context of existential dimensions)**
Following from the previous point, existential coaching and therapy usually differ in the extent of phenomenological exploration of whatever the client brings to the sessions. As coaching is usually time-limited, the degree of unpacking the client’s issues against the backdrop of existential dimensions is more limited and focused on what is really relevant to the contracted goals of the relationship.

**Level of vulnerability of the client**
Existential psychotherapists usually work with vulnerable clients, who come to therapy as a consequence of a crisis that they struggle to cope with (Van Deurzen, 1997, Yalom, 1980). It seems to be applicable to all clients as long as they express a wish to and are physically and mentally capable of exploring their quandaries and conundrums and remove unnecessary obstacles through a practical method for the direct discussion of the trials and tribulations of their human existence. That said, the coach will pay close attention to the client’s level of vulnerability and engage in open discussion as to which aspects of their lives the client is willing or able to explore. Even though an existential coach may often not be sufficiently trained to deal with severe emotional breakdown in the face of an unpacked dilemma, the applications of existential coaching are theoretically unlimited (Van Deurzen and Hanaway, 2012) and therefore subject to the practitioner’s judgement of his or her own skills and qualifications.

In conclusion, existential coaching and existential therapy and counselling can be distinguished, but only at their extremes. A lot of overlap remains and as discussed in the following section, clients often fluctuate on these three dimensions as they go through the change process. Therefore the existential framework already seems a natural habitat for the integration of coaching and therapy aspects.

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2 It is interesting to note that, while usually coaching tends to be restricted to well-functioning people (REFERENCE), in all existing accounts of existential coaching there is no mention of a boundary regarding the sort of clients that will benefit from an existential coaching approach.
**Benefits of an integrational approach**

**Definitions can be restrictive**

Going back and forth between a coach and a therapist as a consequence of referrals, caused by a practitioner’s pre-defined realm of practice, is likely to disrupt the helping process severely and can be very frustrating to the client. Van Deurzen writes that “clients want a [practitioner] who is trustworthy, understanding and capable. They imagine that it is possible to live rather more resourcefully than they are doing at present and they look for signs living in the professional they consult” (Van Deurzen, 1997, p.189). These characteristics usually go beyond what practitioners can convey in their promotion material. When a client has found such a person - a fellow traveller skilled at listening, interested in understanding, authentic, honest, direct, open, trustworthy and capable of providing a safe space in which to reflect, ponder and understand life better - they most likely do not want to be forced to find somebody else just because the practitioner’s job description or adopted code of ethics disallows a continuation of fruitful exploration outside the realm of their business card. While it is possible to find two such people, a coach and a therapist, the benefits of working with a single person are obvious. Therefore I believe it is in the best interest of the client to either leave questions of definition aside or, alternatively, create new definitions for integrated coach-therapy work. This will allow us to focus on what is really important: the client’s wants and needs at any given moment during the process of change.

**Clients – changing quicker than you can ask ‘How does that make you feel?’**

As demonstrated, existential coaching and existential therapy overlap to a large degree. The areas, in which they differ, are subject to change and fluctuation during the course of each client’s process of change. The existential practitioner will know to adapt to these changes in his or her client’s psychological wellbeing, mood or capacity to think, plan or make decisions, often on a moment-to-moment basis.

As for temporality and the depth or breadth of exploration, some coaching clients may choose to prolong the duration of the relationship as a result of discovering particular obstacles to growth that turn out to go beyond their initial expectations (the iceberg principle). Adjusting to these new goals may require a re-contracting of the relationship’s duration and potentially shift the practitioner’s role into the therapeutic realm. Similarly, well-functioning (non-vulnerable) clients may experience phases of strong anxiety when they gain powerful insights into themes or patterns of their life and worldview. On the other side of the spectrum, therapy clients may temporarily leave their initial vulnerable state and experience phases of high wellbeing, positive mood and clear cognitive functioning in which they will benefit best from a coaching approach; after which they might slip back into episodes of despair and strong anxiety for a variety of possible reasons. Existentially-minded practitioners acknowledge that these fluctuations in mood, motivation and the degree, to which a client may experience anxiety and struggle with the often harsh realities of being alive, are not only normal, but inevitable. Situations, memories, associations or other stimuli can trigger emotional responses that impact significantly on the dynamics of the relationship and require immediate attention. The practitioner will have to adjust their being-with the client on a moment-to-moment basis. Therefore I very much agree with Summerfield, who noted that “a good coach may be constantly switching between coaching and counselling during a single session” (Summerfield, 2002, p.37) and I believe this is true for a good therapist also, who will not have a one-fits-all rule for when to refer a client to a coach or when to end the relationship.
The practitioner, who is willing to adjust the initially contracted goals during the course of the relationship, simply works with the client’s human nature. As long as the practitioner adjusts their role in accordance to the client’s needs and takes into consideration ethical issues such as dependency, personal boundaries or limits to their skills, it can only be beneficial to the client.

With regards to existential practitioners, psychotherapist and writer Yalom (2009) urges therapists to create a different therapy for each client by being sensitive to their unique character and worldview. Similarly, existential therapist and coach Spinelli argues that “it is not terribly useful to apply general techniques to specific and uniquely experienced life issues” (Spinelli, 2005, p.1).

It will be worthwhile to investigate to which degree practitioners are already integrating aspects of counselling, therapy and coaching, respectively, into their work. Arguably, coaches have had more freedom to do so due to the non-regulation of their profession. In the face of upcoming regulations and with regards to the above mentioned arguments, an official formulation of models of integration has long been overdue and practitioners of both disciplines will benefit greatly from an open discussion about how to work in this way.

Existentialism – a fertile ground for integration

Covering the whole spectrum of human experience

Linley & Harrington state that we should be “striving to reclaim the study of people in their completeness” (2007, p.43). I believe that, when working with people in a helping-by-talking relationship, we should similarly be striving to work with people in their completeness instead of focusing only on certain aspects of their existence. Existential themes run underneath most issues that clients bring to therapy or coaching and all human beings will find themselves struggling with their existential givens.

The dynamic interplay between positives and negatives is the main hallmark of Existential Positive Psychology, an integrational approach of positive psychology and existentialism (Wong, 2010). Wong proposes that “positives cannot exist apart from negatives and that authentic happiness necessarily grows from pain and suffering” (Wong, 2010, p.4). Similarly existential thinker and author Camus (1968) stated that “[t]here is no joy of life without despair” (p.56). This is to say, that any form of one-to-one practice, which does not address despair, hardship, adversity, pain or suffering in addition to positive aspects of existence, cannot lead to growth and personal development. Authentic living therefore promotes facing the whole spectrum of one’s experience including anxiety, death and meaninglessness but also joy, happiness, purpose and direction, hope and faith, learning, creativity and positive change.

Philosophical grounding

“Solid psychological science requires much more than an adequate acquaintance with quantitative methods and tools of investigation. It requires a refined analysis of assumptions that we, as researchers, make; an ability to see the context in which we are asking our questions; and acknowledge the implications of our hypotheses in relation to our assumptions and our context. In other words, we need a sound philosophical understanding of the ways in which we attempt to study ourselves.” (Young-Eisendrath, 2003, p.170).
I strongly believe that this statement is a valid argument not only with regards to psychological science but also, if not more importantly, with regards to helping-by-talking practices that aim to generate long-term positive change. Only when our work is based on a coherent philosophical framework spanning across the whole spectrum of human experience – which existentialism has been demonstrated to be - are we able to understand, notice, appreciate and acknowledge, if not manage or work across that very spectrum.

**Applied philosophy - tangible and real in everyday life**

Existential philosophy is concerned with the big questions of human lived-existence. However, with regards to one-to-one practice and specifically the topic of integration, it makes sense to consider big and small questions across the whole spectrum of human experience. Therefore, it is worthwhile to consider Wong’s (2010) first attempt to integrate existential psychology and positive psychology (Csikszentmihalyi & Seligman, 2000), which resulted in a compilation of such questions (see Table1, adapted from Jacob, 2012). These themes and questions - even though often not explicit or overt - surface in all areas of day-to-day reality such as the news, literature, everyday school life, song lyrics, pieces of art, clients’ discourses, psychiatric evaluations, at the workplace and within families. They are real to all people most of the time, not limited to clients of coaching or therapy. Although many of Wong’s questions are within the positive spectrum of human experience, they are not easy questions to answer. As Wong writes: “It is the spirit of asking tough questions and rejecting pre-packaged easy answers that characterizes existential psychology” (Wong, 2010, p.2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Existential themes</th>
<th>Positive psychology themes</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Who am I?</strong> What defines me? Who am I when everything is stripped away from me and I am reduced to a naked lonely soul? Is there anything unique and special about me?</td>
<td>Isolation Personal world Relational world Authenticity (Heidegger, 1962) Personal Identity (Wong, 2010)</td>
<td>Identity Character strengths Positive personal traits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. How can I be happy?</strong> Why am I bored? Why am I so dissatisfied with life? What is the good life? Why is happiness so illusive? Is this all there is to life?</td>
<td>Personal world, spiritual world, meaning/lessness, balance between the worlds, The pursuit of happiness (Wong, 2010)</td>
<td>A vast majority of positive psychology is concerned with these questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. What should I do with my life?</strong> How should I then live? How could I live in a way that my life counts for something? What is my calling? To what should I devote the rest of my life?</td>
<td>Meaning (Frankl, 1967) Ultimate concerns (Tillich, 1952); Life mission</td>
<td>N.A by neutral scientists who choose not to pursue an agenda, yet very much related to one-to-one work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. How do I make the right choices?</strong> How do I know that I am making the right decision regarding career and relationships? How can I tell right from wrong? What do I know what is the responsible thing to do in complex situations with conflicting moral demands?</td>
<td>Choice Freedom Responsibility Dilemma</td>
<td>Motivation Goals Future focus interventions Values in Action (strengths)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5. Where do I belong?</strong> Why do I feel so alone in this world? Why don’t I feel at</td>
<td>Isolation Physical world, social world,</td>
<td>Relatedness Self Acceptance as a</td>
</tr>
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home in this planet earth? Where is my home? Where do I belong? How can I develop deep and meaningful relationships? Where can I find acceptance?

| spiritual world, I-thou relationships (Buber, 1937) | Hell is other people (Sartre, 1944) | pillar of psychological wellbeing (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) |

6. **What is the point of striving when life is so short?** Why should I struggle to survive when life is transient and fragile? What is the point of building something only to see it swallowed up by death?

| Meaninglessness through loss of ultimate concern (Tillich, 1952); Death; Frankl |
| Positive aging Goals Meaning Frankl |

**Table 1:** The six existential dimensions identified by Wong’s (2010) and areas within existential thought and positive psychology, that they relate to.

However, existential themes run underneath even more specific questions such as
- Why do I procrastinate?
- Why do I feel depressed or anxious for no apparent reason?
- Why can’t I decide between A or B?
- Why am I feeling alone even though I have good relations to others?

The existential practitioner is at an advantage having developed the skills and experience to identify these themes as underlying everyday situations.

**Not a unified method – A different approach to each client**

There is no unified school of existentialism (Moja-Strasser, 1996). As a result, the existential approach has been instrumental in facilitating the integration of many different psychotherapy traditions (Corey, 1996; Hubble and Miller, 2004). Cooper (2003) describes various forms of existential practice and similarly, Van Deurzen and Hanaway (2012) have published a similar collection in the area of existential coaching. The mere fact that there are so many existential approaches, which incorporate methods, instruments, techniques and tools from a multitude of other disciplines, is in itself a good indicator that existentialism seems to provide an ideal ground for integration.

Existential philosophy is primarily a philosophy of human existence, not bound to one method. The only shared method is the phenomenological method of inquiry, which can be applied across the spectrum, from classic long-term existential psychotherapy (Yalom, 1980) to a structured, short-term and rather directive model such as LeBon & Arnaud’s (2012) Existential Decision Coaching. As Cooper writes:

“At the heart of an existential standpoint is the rejection of grand, all-encompassing systems; and a preference for individual and autonomous practices. Hence, few existential therapists have been concerned with establishing one particular way of practicing existential therapy. Indeed for most existential therapists, the idea that this approach can be systematised or even manualised is anathema to the very principles of the approach” (Cooper, 2003, p.2).

Hence, working existentially means to integrate its philosophy with one’s personal style, background and ideological values. Furthermore, since the focus is on the client’s lived
existence, each client requires a slightly different mode of practicing, often on a moment-to-moment basis. An existential framework not only allows the practitioner to do that, but encourages, or even requires, him or her to do so.

**Need for psychotherapeutic training?**

When working with existential themes, the practitioner is somewhat more likely to encounter ‘living in bad faith’ (the denial of existential givens) as an obstacle to growth, development or healing. Therefore it may be required to bring these possibly deep-seated and long-denied existential issues to the foreground. The practitioner is at risk to ‘pull the rug’ underneath their client when his or her sedimented beliefs and worldview are being challenged, which may cause what Kierkegaard (1843) called ‘fear and trembling’. The result may be severe anxiety and possibly a need to completely rebuild the client’s worldview, which is clearly in the realm of psychotherapy.\(^3\) The question arises whether some degree of psychotherapy training should be mandatory for coaches when they work existentially (Bachkirova & Cox, 2005; Brunning, 2006).

**Existential practice and Personal Consultancy (PC):**

When evaluating the PC model, many aspects seem to be similar: Both are broad, open frameworks that allow integration of different modes of practice. Both explore their clients’ experiences phenomenologically. Both embrace the complexity of human beings and hence stress the importance of developing an awareness of the client’s individual values, assumptions, beliefs and any associated internal conflicts “before we help them embark on any tangible change” (p.90, this issue). Both approaches therefore acknowledge that the helping process needs to be somewhat adjusted to fit the practitioner’s own unique characteristics at the time, those of each client and, most importantly, the relationship between them at any given moment (non-linearity and diversity). Any diagnosing or assessing clients is avoided and instead the person is approached as a whole. Furthermore, there is no top-down control or uniformity in either approach, no founder or creator of an overarching theory that would have significant influence on their future development and both are unlikely to be shaped by particular social circumstances or prone to ideological bias.

The very definition of PC’s elements resonates extremely well with an existential approach to integration:

“Consultancy is defined as meeting which is held to discuss something and to decide what should be done about it […]. Personal signifies that it is about focusing on the person and personal matters that, of course, may include social and professional issues as well.”

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\(^3\) Looking through case studies of existential practitioner, similar scenarios as the following are not uncommon: “What began as a referral for panic [for which nowadays effective short-term CBT treatment exists] became a complete re-examination of the values by which she lived.” (Bretherton & Ørner 2004, p.424). While this process is undoubtedly helpful in the long-term, we must not undermine our clients’ agency and therefore contract clearly which route they want to choose. Brunning, criticizing the influence that the 'quick-fix approach of many CBT practices' has on coaching, also points to the potential dangers through “coaches who lack rigorous psychological training doing more harm than good” (Brunning, 2006, p.XXV).
Integration from an existential perspective includes elements of coaching such as Peltier’s (2001) ‘get going’ which represents that something is to be done about it. Existential practice, furthermore constitutes a philosophical exploration of the client’s personal world (Van Deurzen, 1997) and acknowledges that humans are complex, interconnected beings and that therefore workplace issues and personal issues can rarely be separated (Van Deurzen, 2009). One paragraph in an earlier chapter of this book signifies the link to existentialism particularly well with regards to uncertainty and the anxiety that is experienced as a result, an existential given, as well as its whole approach to one-to-one practice as outlined by Van Deurzen in all of her many publications. Popovic and Jinks write:

“For many practitioners, however, being well-versed in a particular approach gives them a sense of security and confidence. Adopting an open model can be anxiety-provoking. The personal consultant needs to be prepared to work with that anxiety rather than trying to get rid of it. […] We believe that a reasonable level of uncertainty and ensuing anxiety keeps practitioners alert and is conducive to the process. […] We need to embrace some uncertainty and the possibility that we may be frequently surprised, no matter how experienced we are.” (p.94, this issue)

The main difference that emerges between the two approaches is that in the PC model there seems to be a rather clear demarcation line between coaching and counselling (as well as other approaches to helping-by-talking) while existential coaching and therapy are, to a large extent, more of a fusion, using the same methods across the whole spectrum of the client’s experience.

Furthermore, existential practice, in contrast to the PC model, starts from a conceptualisation of the person (instead of the practice) and many of its advocates make some assumptions about human nature as being flexible and generally non-determined (Van Deurzen 1997, Yalom 1980). However, existential philosophy allows for different assumptions on human nature, as it merely conceptualizes the human condition, rather than deriving theories about human nature or behaviour. Existentialism therefore is not a theory, but rather a philosophy concerned with the givens of human lived-existence.

Other notable differences include PC’s work with all time perspectives (past, present, future) to equal degrees, whereas existential approaches - though not ignoring or avoiding exploration of the past - generally prefer working with the here-and-now and its relevance to future goals; as well as differences in their selection criteria for clients, namely that personal consultants will have none while working existentially is somewhat restricted (see Appendix A).

In summary, while a few differences emerge, PC can be embedded smoothly within an existential framework. Existential philosophy may greatly enhance the practice of the personal consultant who feels attracted by its characteristics. More importantly, clients to PC, who grapple with the very questions that existential thinkers have spent so much time exploring, will undoubtedly benefit from an existential way of practicing and the conceptualisations within its philosophical accounts.

Conclusion

Existential philosophy has led to the creation of many approaches to therapy and counselling and recently entered the realm of coaching. As a universal framework of human lived-existence it covers the whole spectrum of clients’ experiences. Many practitioners, who work existentially, have already incorporated various aspects of other coaching and therapy approaches into their existential work and vice versa. In its own sphere, existential therapy and existential coaching share a great deal of commonalities and there is a large overlap between their characteristics and methods. Even the aspects in which they differ are subject to
change during the process of the relationship, often within single sessions. Therefore many practitioners adjust to their clients’ needs by adopting different roles, often during single sessions, so that therapists naturally find themselves in coaching roles and vice versa. Existentialism therefore seems a natural habitat for integration and it has been shown through comparison that consequently, the personal consultancy model can be smoothly embedded within an existential framework. However, a considerable degree of training, and more importantly, an active involvement in the exploration of existential themes in practitioners’ own lives (through e.g. supervision) is a core aspect for good existential integrative practice. I therefore call for an active engagement in discussion and evaluation of integrative models to integration so that practitioners can provide high standards of quality in their work and ensure ethical practice.

References:


Appendix A: Guidelines for clients and practitioners who consider working within an existential framework

Guidelines for the client
People naturally desire quick-fix solutions, metaphorical or literal ‘magic pills’ and many coaching approaches happily provide answers and share experience. Therefore an existential approach to one-to-one work will not be the preferred choice for every client. It works best for someone who

• is willing to engage in the process of exploring and re-evaluating their assumptions, beliefs and worldview,
• wishes to develop a certain level of self awareness and understanding,
• is willing and courageous enough to face and explore the unknown,
• values the following basic assumptions about human nature (as derived by Van Deurzen and Adams, 2011, p.41):
  - It is possible to make sense of life.
  - It is good to do so.
  - Each person has the capacity for making informed decisions about their life and their attitude towards it.
  - Difficult issues will not be resolved by being avoided.
  - Human nature is basically flexible.
  - People are able to learn from life and transcend problems.

“If there is no readiness to enter a philosophical exploration of their personal world it is unlikely that much existential work can be accomplished.” (Van Deurzen, 1997, p. 200)

Guidelines for the practitioner
Working from an existential perspective requires a certain set of attitudes and skills that can and need to be developed in order to deliver good and ethical practice (see Van Deurzen & Adams, 2011). Existential practitioners

• will have a certain degree of training, including aspects of psychotherapy,
• will have, to some degree, grappled with existential issues themselves and developed an awareness of and the ability to identify existential themes when they present themselves,
• regard the client as fundamentally equal and their role as that of fellow traveller, not an expert (unless, arguably, in situations when the expert role is authentic and based on the practitioners relevant experience),
• value their own assumptions and beliefs but are willing and able to bracket them during phenomenological exploration of the client’s experience,
• do not shy away from challenging or speaking openly and directly about their doubts, curiosities or opinions, when relevant to the client’s agenda,
• are willing and motivated to make sense of their own lives, are constantly aware of, evaluating and re-evaluating their assumptions, beliefs and past experiences and cherish and utilize their capacity for learning, growth and change. They accept that their own worldview is at best temporarily coherent and are therefore open to be challenged and engage in constant exploration of life’s paradoxes and difficulties.

“I recognize myself when my value system becomes too tidy and my life too neatly organized and my views too secure and my whole being too self-righteously existential. Then it is time to let myself be plunged back into the abyss of life, from where I have to rediscover what attracted me to this way of working in the first place. […] Those who sound too self-assured and too definite about what makes a [practitioner] existential,
or those who are too sure that existential is right, are clearly out of touch with forces that determine matters of life or death" (Van Deurzen, 1997, p.200-201).