An existential challenge to some dominant perspectives in the practice of contemporary counselling psychology

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Content & Focus: *This paper aims to explore a number of key challenges raised by existential theory to the dominant assumptions, aims and practices within contemporary counselling psychology. It argues that the existential focus on relatedness significantly alters counselling psychology's understanding of, and ways of perceiving individuals as well as the concerns that are brought to the therapeutic encounter.*
Keywords: *Relatedness; authenticity; the self; therapeutic encounter; un-knowing.*

FOR MANY COUNSELLING PSYCHO-LOGISTS, existential thought and practice focus upon a number of key themes – such as meaning/meaninglessness, being/non-being, isolation, and so forth – which can be explored as part of the overall narratives of their clients. This thematic focus provides practitioners from just about any contemporary model of therapy with a way of integrating their approach with that of various key concerns associated with existential ideas. Integrative enterprises along these lines are not to be dismissed nor denigrated and they appear to be increasingly attractive to many counselling psychologists (McLeod & Cooper, 2012).

However, this paper takes the position that existential counselling psychology, as with existential therapy in general, is *much more than* a collection of themes that might or might not be shared with other approaches. Instead, it will seek to argue that existential thought and practice provides counselling psychologists with an approach/ model/attitude/theory that can stand on its own; that has its own specific 'take' on the issues that remain central to counselling psychology as a whole; and which adopts a stance toward such issues that in many profound ways provides the means for a series of significant challenges that are primarily focused upon a structured critique of how contemporary counselling psychology (as well as therapy in general) and its aims are predominantly understood and practised (Barnett & Madison, 2011; Cooper, 2003; Jacobsen, 2007; Langdridge, 2007, 2013; Spinelli, 1994, 1997, 2005, 2007).

The challenge of being
As I understand it, existential theory proposes a view of being that is founded upon a process-like 'flow' of *being-always-becoming*. It also proposes that human beings' reflective experiences of this 'flow' reveal an inevitable act of interpretation which substantiates, structures or 'thing-ifies' 'being-always-becoming' into 'being-as-substance'. This very same act of essential-ising/substantiating/structuring the flow of being-always-becoming is itself the source to the universal – and inescapable – human experience of existential anxiety. Why? Because no reflectively-derived substantive construct can *fully* capture/contain/ secure/stabilise the flow of being-always-becoming. Reflection can only, and always, allow only for incomplete meanings that attempt to grasp this flow within confines of time and space – that is to say, within reflective structures. In this way, existential thought argues that the quest for any fully-

realised and permanent coherence, completeness or fulfilment in one's lived experience of being can only ever be just that – a quest and attempt, a movement towards, rather than any achievement or arrival. Karl Jaspers summarised this view wonderfully: *'Man is always something more than what he knows of himself. He is not what he is simply once and for all, but is a process'* (Jaspers, 2009, p.116).

In addition, existential theory argues that Western thought and reflections upon our existence, especially since Descartes, have substantiated being in a specifically divisive dualistic mode of interpretative reflecting that extends to all of our meanings, values, assumptions, statements and attitudes either about or toward being. The divides we impose upon our reflections on, for instance, self/other, subject/object, mind/body, thought/emotion are both obvious and critical examples of our particularly separatist Western way of dualistic reflection. In its broadest sense, this way of reflecting has allowed us to construe being only as 'boundaried' or 'bounded' as well as individualistically/subjectively dominated rather than relationally attuned. In short, such forms of reflection have served to reduce the foundational relatedness of flowing being-always-becoming to mere relationship – that is, the interaction of, by and between separate beings whose existence is claimed to be understandable and explicable from an originating, individualistically-boundaried perspective.

This is the crux of existential theory's most foundational challenge and, I think, is also the distinguishing feature that sets it aside from the vast majority of other contemporary models of psychology. Existential theory rejects the idea of a subjectively-originated, boundaried individual whose issues, concerns and disorders can be understood and treated as expressions and disturbances 'from within'. Instead, an existential focus begins with the basic assumption of a foundational being-derived *relatedness*. This key hypothesis, that individuals spring forth from, and are expressions of, this relational grounding is encapsulated in a quote by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *'The world and I are within one another'* (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p.123).

Relatedness

At its simplest, the principle of relatedness argues that all of our embodied felt-experiences and behaviours, all of our reflective knowledge, awareness and understanding of the world, of others and of our selves, emerge through an irreducible *grounding of relatedness*. We cannot, therefore, adequately understand nor make sense of human beings – our selves included – on their own or in isolation, but always and only in and through their inter-relational context. At a deeper level, this view insists upon the interrelatedness and interdependence of what in a modern empiricist tradition has been called 'subject' and 'object' (or 'self' and 'other', or 'self' and 'world'). From the standpoint of existential phenomenology, none of these terms makes sense in and of itself, just as none can, in fact, be defined or considered in isolation. One major implication from this is that the subject who is 'I' can attempt to know him/herself *only* by means of 'the world' and of the 'others' who inhabit it (Spinelli, 2007). And further, that whatever knowledge is ascertained is not located *within* the subject, nor is it present as a *given* of the subject, but rather only emerges via the elucidation of this inter-relational *a priori* (Gergen, 2009). This view tells us that relatedness is not something that becomes established only under certain circumstances or as a result of particular conditions or which we work towards. Rather, 'relatedness is'. Always. Even the attempt to disrupt or to deny relatedness emerges as an expression of relatedness.

Practising existential counselling psychology

One critical consequence of relatedness that is central to the practice of counselling psychology is this: the dilemmas, dysfunc-

tions and disorders that individuals experience and bring to therapy are now to be considered as expressions and consequences of their grounding in relatedness. They may arise from a lack of 'fit' between a person's dispositional stances toward being (i.e. one's beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, expectations, feelings and behaviours regarding who and how one is/is not or should/should not be) versus his or her actual experience of being. They might also arise as undesirable or unforeseen consequences of adopting and maintaining a particular dispositional stance toward being. They might be expressions of the pain of being experientially attuned to being possibilities that cannot be fulfilled. Or they may 'simply' be the outcome of the limitations of 'capturing' the experience of being-always-becoming from a substantiating reflective standpoint. Whatever the case, they remain inevitable and insolvable dilemmas arising from one's attempts to both embrace and remain distanced from relatedness.

As such, the alternative perspective being proposed by existential therapy does not sit easily with currently dominant modes of theory and practice within counselling psychology. For one, it rejects the idea of treating individuals as isolated beings who can be understood and treated from an exclusively intra-psychic perspective. Further, it rejects the assumption that counselling psychologists can attend to and alter or amend 'parts' of an individual without such interventions affecting the whole of the being (and of being as a whole) in ways which remain currently unpredictable. Third, it rejects the view that a disorder is solely problematic and instead proposes that expressions of disorder may well also be crucial to the continued – and desired – maintenance of the current reflectively-maintained, boundaried being.

In taking this stance, existential counselling psychology shifts the focus of its practice in various ways. For one, it is much more concerned with the descriptive investigation of *how it is to experience being in a given*

set of relational circumstances and conditions than it is with any directive interventionist treatment of dysfunctions. In this sense, existential counselling psychology is more akin to research enquiry focused on understanding than it is to quasi-medical attempts to heal. For another, it is far less concerned with highlighting any particular subject matter deemed to be appropriate (or inappropriate) for therapeutic discourse (be it verbal or action-based) than it is in attempting a particular way or mode of engagement with whatever presents itself for dialogue *in the way* that it presents itself without seeking to amend, amplify or reconfigure it. This overall attitudinal stance ultimately serves to challenge both clients and counselling psychologists in their dominant mode of reflecting upon being – be it focused on their experience of self, of others, or of the world. In brief, the primary concern for existential counselling psychology is not about establishing a relationship but about experiencing relatedness as it presents itself to reflective experience.

Stated with an eye on brevity, the enterprise of existential counselling psychology is to engage in a mutually truthful discourse focused upon the exploration and elucidation of how and in what ways the client construes being from the standpoint of a series of relations – relations to self, to others and to the world in general. The client's presenting problem(s) and concerns are placed within these various relational foci so that their impact upon these can be more adequately discerned. In doing so, the client (or counselling psychologist, or both) may find alternatives, challenges, contradictions, and so forth that provoke shifts in meaning, felt experience and behaviour – either through active attempts to change these conditions or, more commonly, through a more 'owned' acceptance of these conditions and their possibilities (as well as their limits). It is the existential counselling psychologist's 'skill' in being there in the encounter with the client that is critical to the enterprise. This way of 'being there'

is inquisitive but not judgemental, engaged but not authoritarian, more concerned with promoting a 'stillness' that remains focused upon what currently presents itself experientially to the client in order to provoke a more honest awareness of *who and how the client is being rather than focused upon directed change regarding who and how different the client has been or can become* (Spinelli, 2007).

Authenticity

In short, from the perspective of existential theory, central ideas and themes that both define and permeate counselling psychology – themes such as freedom and its limitations, choice, identity, meaning/meaninglessness, in/authenticity, 'real' or genuine expressions of self versus 'false' or masked versions and so forth are always to be contextualised within the foundational assumption of relatedness. Without the centrality of relatedness all of the above ideas become subjectively-focused ideals to which essence-derived individuals may aspire for their own personal self-development. From within a context of relatedness, however, a very different view can be seen to emerge.

Consider, for example, the notion of *authenticity* or 'being authentic'. The majority views adopted by counselling psychologists – as well as more 'everyday' views – regarding authenticity approach it within a subjectivist, or self-oriented, perspective. Such views consider the possibility of a truly 'authentic self' from a substantive, unitary set of pre-suppositions regarding self (see below for further discussion). In this way, authenticity becomes something that an individual can 'work toward' or might even attain in a lasting, or final, manner. This kind of authenticity resides within an individual, is an expression of that individual and is achieved by that individual through various means that prompt him or her toward his or her true or genuine or real self.

This is a perfectly acceptable way of understanding authenticity and I would not for a moment wish to castigate anyone for

adopting this view. However, it is also a view that is not – and if my arguments above are correct, *cannot* be – shared by existential counselling psychologists. For one thing, the existential perspective on authenticity does not recognise it as a stance to being that can truly be 'worked upon' or achieved in any permanent sense. It has no implied suggestion of psychological, spiritual or developmental superiority over other ways of being. Again, wrapped in paradox as it is, existentially-speaking, the very claim of achieving authenticity is itself a statement of inauthenticity. The notion of existential authenticity is intimately connected to the foundational existential assumption of being-always-becoming and, as such, cannot be captured within notions of any given substantive state or condition. In many ways, the experience of authenticity, from an existential standpoint, cannot really be talked about; the term serves as a reflective 'pointer towards' rather than a thing, or state, in and of itself.

In my view, this same debate arose in the now famous dialogue between Carl Rogers and Martin Buber (Buber & Rogers, 1990). Rogers, from a humanistic perspective, attempted to argue that person-centred therapy can provoke, or be provoked by, an I-Thou relationship. Buber's response, as I understand it, disputed this assertion and basically argued that any claim to the establishment of an I-Thou relationship actually revealed an I-It relationship in that the experience of I-Thou is not some 'thing' that is substantive and fixed in time (much less permanent) but rather a 'flow' of being-always-becoming.

The self

In like manner, the different meanings arising from a term such as authenticity raise further divergences that impact upon seemingly less esoteric terms such as 'the self'. Once again, at a surface level, both existential and other therapeutic approaches place great emphasis on the issue of the self and, in this sense, there exists a set of shared concerns that would suggest similar stances

and positions. However, the moment one goes beyond this surface agreement, critical divergences begin to reveal themselves.

The existential focus upon relatedness contradicts this persistent assumption held not only by the majority of counselling psychologists but by Western culture in general: namely, that the person is best viewed and understood from an isolationist perspective and, as an individual, is comprehensible solely within his or her set of subjectively-derived meanings, felt experiences and behaviours. As such, the dominant ethos of counselling psychology assumes the primacy of the individual subject. It is common for psychological theories of self to suggest that it is only once the individual has 'found', 'accepted', or 'authenticated' him or her self, and by so doing begun to deal with the issues and obstacles impeding or imposing upon the experience and expression of one's 'true', 'authentic' and/or 'self-actualising' potential for being, that the individual is then capable of focusing upon and addressing the possibilities of relationship with others and the world in general.

In contrast to this view, the principle that relatedness is foundational proposes that no self can be 'found', nor individual 'emerge', other than via the *a priori* inter-relational grounding from which that self's distinctive and unique sense of being emerges. Existential relatedness argues that self- (as well as other- and world-) awareness is an outcome of, rather than a starting point to relatedness.

Most of the contemporary counselling psychology approaches to the self assert the ability to distinguish between 'real' expressions of self as opposed to 'false self' manifestations; the underlying (if often fractured) unity of self; its intra-psychic origins; and, not least, the self as source-point to experiences of being such that the discovery of self leads to the discovery of others and of relationship. I have not here the space to argue out the existential rationale that disputes all of these key assumptions, but in brief I can at least state

that, from an existential standpoint, all of the above notions of self are viewed as expressions of a reflective, substantiating attempt to 'capture' the flow of being-always-becoming (Spinelli, 2001, 2006). From this latter perspective, the self is an outcome rather than a source and is more accurately a structure or a construct. This construct can be both coherent and divided, multiple and apparently singular, both open and resistant to alterations in reflective experience. But a construct it is and so remains. Existentially speaking, it makes little sense to speak of a distinction between real and false selves. When is the self that is ever anything *but* 'real' insofar as it is the self that presents itself to reflection?

In brief, the stance being considered is very much in keeping with the following conclusion by Kitaro Nishida: *'it is not that there is experience because there is an individual, but that there is an individual because there is experience'* (Nishida, 1990, p.37).

The therapeutic relationship

The existential emphasis on the primacy of relatedness further challenges counselling psychology's dominant perspectives on the therapeutic relationship. What is arguably the most radical challenge to dominant perspectives on the therapeutic relationship can be found in the writings of Martin Buber (1970, 2002). If we consider his famous distinction of 'I-It' and 'I-Thou' relations, then it becomes evident that therapy, in its overwhelming allegiance to the individual per se, remains embedded within an 'I-It' attitude. For example, Buber argued that the therapist who treats a person as merely another individual 'I' does not really see that person but only a projected image of the therapist him or her self and that this relation, despite its warmth, care, and concern still remains an 'I-It' relation. Must we agree with Buber? That remains an open question. But let us suppose that there is a way out for the therapeutic relationship to at least begin to approach 'I-Thou' relatedness. What might be the necessary conditions for such?

As a starting point, it seems to me that the work of the relational analyst, Leslie Farber, who was deeply influenced by Buber's ideas, provides an initial possibility. Farber saw therapy as a particular expression of relatedness. One critical implication of this can be noted in Farber's insistence that the topic (or the 'whatness') of therapeutic dialogue could 'be about' anything – its content did not truly matter. Instead, Farber's dialogical concerns centred on *a way of talking* that led both therapist and client toward a 'truthful dialogue' with themselves and one another (Farber, 1967, 2000).

This notion of a 'truthful dialogue' parallels the ideas put forward by the phenomenological philosopher George Gadamer. Gadamer contrasted the truthfulness that emerges via a dialogue that is pre-set in its focus and intent by at least one of the participants to one that is initially open or ambiguous in its intention or direction by at least one of the participants. All dialogues, Gadamer acknowledged, have – or more accurately – *find* a direction, but there exists a truthful quality to a dialogue that shapes its own form and focus that cannot be ascertained – or experienced – in a dialogue that is being actively directed toward a certain pre-set goal. One consequence of this, as Gadamer wrote, is that *'the way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders than the led. No one knows in advance what will 'come out' of such a conversation'* (Gadamer, 2004, p.383). Paradoxically, this 'abdication of control' over the directive aspects of dialogue permits a greater sense of its 'ownership' by its participants.

What such relatedness-attuned existential views direct counselling psychology toward is a very uncertain and uneasy form of therapeutic relationship that depends to a great extent upon the counselling psychologist's active willingness and ability to abdicate many if his or her most cherished assumptions; not least those of therapist-led and directed change.

Un-knowing

Instead, what is being highlighted by the principle of relatedness is highly similar to what the existential psychiatrist Karl Jaspers termed as the therapist's enterprise of *not-knowing* (Jaspers, 1963). For some years now, I have myself referred to this stance as that of *un-knowing* (Spinelli, 2006b). I employ a hyphenated spelling in order to distinguish 'un-knowing' as that attempt on the part of the counselling psychologist to remain as open as possible to that which presents itself in the current and on-going encounter. As such, it expresses the attempt to treat the seemingly familiar, assumed to be understood or understandable, as novel, unfixed in meaning, and, hence, accessible to previously unexamined lived possibilities. The attempt to 'un-know' suggests the counselling psychologist's willingness to explore the world of the client in a fashion that not only seeks to remain respectful of the client's unique way of being-in-the-world, but also to be receptive to the challenges to the counselling psychologist's own narrational biases and assumptions (be they personal or professional or both) that this exploration may well provoke. Put bluntly, un-knowing requires the counselling psychologist to be willing to abdicate, at least for the time being, a great deal of that which might, from the standpoint of most psychological models and approaches, be taken as the counselling psychologist's authority, security, expertise and interpretative power.

Un-knowing directs the counselling psychologist toward such self-directed questions such as:

What is it like for me, the counselling psychologist, to be in the presence of this other?
What is it like for you, the client, to be as you are being in my presence?
What is it like for each of us to be experiencing being in one another's presence?
How willing am I, the counselling psychologist, to attempt an enterprise of shifting between the above polarities?

Such questions, in turn, focus upon the engagement with relatedness as it presents

itself – in other words, upon 'what is here for me/you/us' as opposed to 'what once might have been' or 'what may one day be' for the client. This way of relating expresses its genuineness through the counselling psychologist's and client's diverse experiences of both 'meeting' and 'failing to meet' one another in their encounter.

In adopting a stance of un-knowing, the whole focus of applied counselling psychology centres much more, if not exclusively, upon what is taking place *directly* between counselling psychologist and the client. This focus serves to expose and clarify *in the immediacy of the current encounter* the self-same inter-relational issues that clients express as being deeply problematic within their wider world relations. The client who feels himself to be perpetually and immediately judged by others may experience this in the presence of the other who is the counselling psychologist. Or, alternatively, may experience the novelty of not experiencing that which he expects of the other, either in terms of differences in experiences or the non-experience of the problematic experience that has brought him to therapy. In all cases, the experience being descriptively identified, clarified and examined in the immediacy of the current encounter is current (rather than an attempt to recapture a past event) and can be compared and contrasted with other instances of its felt presence in a variety of ways.

However, his focus on un-knowing and the mutuality it provokes in its immediacy exposes and implicates the presence of the counselling psychologist. However, this way of attempting to be with self and other within the boundaries of a therapeutic relationship requires a human and humane openness to 'being in relation' and all the uncertainty and anxiety and unpredictability contained

therein. As existential thought keeps reminding us: every choice is also a condemnation that has its price (Sartre, 1973). If my arguments have succeeded in enticing you, as counselling psychologists, to embrace, examine and explore the possibilities of an existentially-attuned approach to our profession, then you need also to be aware that you open yourselves to challenges that are capable of seriously disturbing many of your most cherished assumptions regarding what it is to do counselling psychology and to be a counselling psychologist.

The door is open.

About the Author

Professor Ernesto Spinelli is a Fellow of the British Psychological Society (BPS) and in 2000 was awarded the BPS Division of Counselling Psychology Award for Outstanding Contributions to the Advancement of the Profession. He is also UKCP registered existential psychotherapist as well as Fellow and Senior Accredited Member of the BACP. In 1999, Ernesto was awarded a Personal Chair as Professor of Psychotherapy, Counselling and Counselling Psychology. Currently, Ernesto is the Director of ES Associates, an organisation dedicated to the advancement of psychotherapy, coaching, facilitation and mediation through specialist seminars and training programmes. Author of numerous papers and texts, the second edition of *Practising Existential Psychotherapy: The Relational World* (Sage, 2007), which has been widely praised as a major contribution to the advancement of existential theory and practice, is being prepared for publication in 2014.

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