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The power of relational work in existential therapy

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Background to the research

- Trained as an integrative therapist and now teach a range of counselling theories
- Drawn to existential ideas (fits with my world view)
- Interested in the link between theory and practice

Focus of PhD

- How existential therapists use theory/philosophy in practice
- Therapists need to be clearer about the relationship between theory and clinical practice. (Feltham, 1999)
- There seems to be an often “contradictory...association between espoused theory and theory-in-action. Practitioners do not always seem to be doing what they say or think they do.”(Horton, 2012:240, in Feltham and Horton, 2012)

The challenge of existential therapy

Existential therapy offers a particular challenge:

- the lack of specific techniques
- the phenomenological nature of this approach
- particularly challenging to elucidate the relationship between philosophical underpinnings and practice.

The nature of existential counselling

- Focuses on what it means to be human
- Assumes certain 'givens' of existence such as uncertainty, isolation, death, freedom and responsibility and meaninglessness
- Draws on philosophical rather than psychological concepts

The nature of existential counselling

- Challenges the scientific method of subject and object (instead it is consciousness which constructs reality)
- The use of the phenomenological method to understand client's lived experiences (Craig, 2008)

Method and Analysis

- Qualitative study using semi-structured interviews to explore how therapists use philosophy in their practice
- Contacted 30 existential therapists via their websites. Five therapists interviewed so far.
- Following transcription, the data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) leading to identification of some initial themes.

Findings

Key themes emerging include:

- Not 'imposing' external concepts (philosophy emerges from practice)
- Working with and valuing uncertainty, including in the therapeutic relationship
- The challenge and power of 'working relationally'

Not imposing theory

- No overarching theory / no clear therapeutic goal
- Not usually discussing philosophy with the client
- BUT the existential ideas have changed who they are and “the person I am in relationship with the client in the session...not in a head way but in a lived way.”

Working with uncertainty

“ It’s almost like existential theory is a theory about not knowing.”

“ So there isn’t one truth...so any theory that I approach is more about its usefulness rather than its absolute truthfulness.”

Uncertainty of the relationship

- “So I’m as uncertain as you are and not everybody can handle that as a client...”

Case example:

- She...found it very difficult to be the person who was going to be choosing where we went each week....” “I find it really difficult with the spotlight being on me, me having to choose what to talk about..”

Uncertainty of the relationship

- “And it was by absolutely staying with what it was like to, to be in a room being expected to be the person who...did the talking and for me not to know where this was going either.”
- “A huge breakthrough had occurred which was something about how she realised what was going on for her..”

Centrality of the relationship

- The importance of the right ‘fit’

“Its actually more about the people and the way those people are fitting together.” (Rather than a particular model working for a particular person)

- The uniqueness of the relationship

Working relationally

“A component that I will consciously use is to get relational with a client, so to absolutely bring myself into the room you know: ‘What’s going on here between you and me?’ so, which, you know, is part of working phenomenologically of course, but there’s something very moment to moment relational you know, what, how I’m experiencing them. What’s going on for me as well as for them.”

- The therapist’s perspective on the relationship is also important and that can be challenging

The value of relational work

- “We can talk about the relationships they’ve got in their lives ‘til we’re blue in the face but what’s present is the relationship between me and them and the idea that so much of the way that they are relating outside of the therapy room, they will be relating to me in the same way erm so I’m aware of how rich it is.”
- Echoes of transference but the relationship is ‘real’

The value of relational work

- Value of discussing “What’s going on between me and them, how I’m experiencing them...(and) every time I’ve done it it’s ALWAYS proved massively fruitful and I think that’s something I’ve learnt over time...it always brings up something really rich and very often it’s the way into the real work.”

The challenge of relational work

- “It’s hard really to describe how much guts it can take, so why that would be frightening, but sometimes it is....you are affected by those relationships and erm by the clients because you’re, you know, the client is angry with you they’re angry with YOU, it’s not just about the transference idea.”

Conclusions

- The process and the relationship are key
- Emphasise not ‘imposing’ theory, but what do they really mean by this?
- But nevertheless they do draw on theory in some sense-whether it infuses the work or is noticed in the work
- Highlights the problematic nature of how theory relates to practice

References

- Craig, E. (2008). A Brief Overview of Existential Depth Therapy. *The Humanist Psychologist*, 36:3-4, 211-226.
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