

THE THERAPEUTIC RELATIONSHIP: THE EXISTENTIAL APPROACH

Professor Ernesto Spinelli

ES Associates, London UK

1. BACKGROUND TO THE APPROACH

All psychotherapeutic theories are underpinned by philosophical assumptions and postulates, even if, in many cases, these remain implicit and covert to practitioners. Existential psychotherapy initially stands out from other approaches to psychotherapy precisely because it acknowledges explicitly and utilises overtly its foundational philosophical assumptions. At the same time, it is not so much *that* it is philosophically grounded but rather it is *the particular set of philosophical suppositions which it espouses* that distinguishes existential psychotherapy from the various current competing alternative models of psychotherapy.

As several authors have argued, the existential approach has no single founder or authoritative source (Yalom, 1980; Cooper, 2003). Rather, it is best understood as a "rich tapestry" of intersecting practices which focus on the analysis of human existence from a set of shared foundational principles. Briefly summarised, the most pertinent of these to a discussion on the therapeutic relationship are:

a. The Inter-Relational Foundation of Human Existence

Stated succinctly, *the* pivotal idea proposed by existential thought argues that the baseline, or foundational condition, for all reflected experiences of being is *inter-relation*. As Merleau-Ponty expresses it: '*The world and I are within one another*' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 123).

This view stands in contrast to the dominant "dualism" that permeates Western thought and culture as a whole and contemporary psychotherapy in particular. The Western tendency to both divide - as in "subject" and "object" - and assume the primacy of one subdivided aspect - "the objective" or "the subjective" - over the other is reflected in the diverse range of contemporary psychotherapeutic models whose competing emphases perpetuate this stance.

As such, and as this chapter will seek to explicate, the emphasis placed by existential psychotherapy upon the therapeutic relationship itself is pivotal to the whole of the therapeutic enterprise not only because of what may be achieved through it but, far more significantly, because the relationship itself expresses and discloses inter-relational ways of being as they are being lived.

b. Meaning

Existential theory argues that humans are "meaning-making" beings. We *interpret* the world via the human process of constructing meaning of those "things" or events which impinge themselves upon our experience and with which we are in relation. Consequently, we are disturbed by the lack or loss of meaning; similarly, we can go to great lengths to avoid or deny those instances and experiences that challenge our most deeply fixed, rigid or *sedimented*, existing meanings - even to the extent of dis-owning, or dissociating from, those experiences that challenge that currently maintained meaning (Heidegger, 1962; Cohn, 2002; Spinelli, 2005).

At the same time, as several key existential theorists have highlighted, our attempts to make meaning of the world reveal that inter-relational foundation through which both "subject" and "object," or "self" and "other", are mutually and simultaneously made meaningful. Every instance of meaning not *only* constructs, or re-constructs, the object of our focus. Just as significantly, the focusing "subject" is also simultaneously

2. THE ROLE OF THE THERAPIST AND CLIENT

From the standpoint of existential psychotherapy, the therapeutic encounter is seen to be the "microcosm" which both explores and expresses the "macrocosm" of the client's currently-lived experience of the possibilities and limitations of inter-relational being in the world (Cohn, 1997; Spinelli, 1997, 2001; Strasser & Strasser, 1997).

the client's way of being in psychotherapy

Existential psychotherapy proposes that the conflicts and issues presented by clients arise from, and are expressions of, the wider overall "way of being" adopted by the client. From this perspective, the client's problematic presenting symptoms or disturbances cannot be isolated, or considered on their own, as separate and distinct from the rest of the client's various "ways of being."

In this way, clients are encouraged to examine the various embodied attitudes, values, beliefs, choices or assumptions regarding what it means and how it is for them to exist in and engage with themselves, others and the world in general. The way the client "is" in the psychotherapeutic relationship reveals his or her wider stance to the possibilities and limitations of existence. As such, the focus of the relationship is on the *client-as-present*.

While clients' typical ways of being at the start of therapy focus upon becoming "other than as they are" through some means of externally-directed therapeutic change, existential psychotherapists seek initially to focus clients on their presenting way of being *as it reveals itself in the therapeutic encounter*.

the existential psychotherapist's way of being in therapy

Within the therapeutic relationship, the existential psychotherapist *is* the other in the client's current experience of being. As this other, the therapist acts as both the representative of all others in the client's wider world relations and, just as importantly, is also the other who challenges the client's way of being toward others as well as the client's perceived impact of others upon his or her way of being.

It is via the first, and crucial, step of "staying with" and "attuning oneself to" the client's current way of being - no matter how debilitating, restrictive, limiting, and irrational it may appear to be to the therapist (if not all others in the client's world, client included) that the existential psychotherapist, *simply via this client-attuned presence*, begins to challenge profoundly the client's expectations regarding how others are, how others expect the client to be, and how the client expects others to be with him or her.

On reflection, it becomes evident that any hope of achieving this enterprise requires initially the therapist's openness to, and acceptance of, the client's presenting way of being. To adopt any other stance which emphasises a directive or manipulative change in the client's way of being, no matter how benevolent or concerned to ameliorate the client's distress, will only serve to allow the client to continue to avoid reflecting upon, and perhaps eventually owning, his or her way of being *as it is* rather than as he or she might want it to be.

In adopting this stance, existential psychotherapists avoid adopting the role of superior, objective instructor who distinguishes for the client those beliefs, attitudes and behaviours that are assumed to be "unreal", "false" and/or "irrational" and who attempts to replace them with "real", "true" and/or "rational" ones. Similarly, rather than present themselves as "symptom-removers", "treatment-providers", "directive educators" or "professional helpers", existential psychotherapists return psychotherapy to its original meaning: the attempt to "stay with", "stand beside" and "accept the otherness of being who is present"

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The existential psychotherapist's task is not one of seeking to impose a directive change in the lived inter-relational world of the client. Rather, it attempts to clarify that world so that its explicit, implicit, and fixed or sedimented assumptions, values, and beliefs can be re-examined and reconsidered inter-rationally. In turn, this attempt can reveal those disowned or dissociated experiences, thoughts, behaviours and affects that serve to maintain the client's current way of being, even if these are experienced as being problematic, undesirable or even seriously debilitating. This should not suggest that existential psychotherapy is antagonistic to the possibilities and benefits of change. Rather, it cautions therapists to bear in mind that the change solutions that are initiated by them can generate far greater distress and unease in living for the client than did the presenting problem.

In addition, existential theory argues that change in any *one* aspect or expression of a person's way of being will alter *the whole* of it. And, further, that in terms of our current understanding, it remains uncertain as to how subtle or radical, beneficial or detrimental, the impact of any given directed manipulation may be upon a particular client's current way of being.

Paradoxically, existential psychotherapy argues that it may be that via the very process of assisting clients to "stay still" so that they can clarify and challenge their stance towards change that the benefits of "therapeutic change" are more likely to occur.

4. THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTIONS

The focus upon a descriptive attunement toward the lived inter-relational world of the client leads existential psychotherapists to recognize that they are no longer able to be the detached objective observer/explorer/clarifier of some facets of their clients' lived experience. Rather, the encounter between therapist and client, while undeniably focused upon the client, is, nonetheless, mutually revelatory. For both client and therapist, the encounter permits a conscious reflection of "this is what and how it is to be who I am being in this relation."

the attempt to "be-with" and "be-for" the client

In their attempts at *being-with* the client, existential psychotherapists seek to give expression to their respect for, and acceptance of, their client's way of being as it presents itself in their current encounter.

In their attitude of *being-for* their clients, existential psychotherapists express their willingness to attempt a non-judgemental, descriptively-focused entry into that way of being in order to disclose, together with their client, the underlying, often implicit and inadequately acknowledged, values, beliefs, assumptions, attitudinal stances and their accompanying affective and behavioural components which infuse and maintain it.

While neither the attempt to *be-with* or *be-for* the client can ever be fully achieved, and remains an aim or attempt rather than an fulfilment, nonetheless the undertaking may well provoke one of the biggest challenges that the client is likely to experience: Here is an "other" (the therapist) who is not distorting, subverting, interpreting, amending, or seeking to impose a novel set of beliefs and values upon the client's currently adopted way of being but who, rather, is attempting to accept it as it presents itself in the immediacy of the inter-relational encounter.

choices about new-found alternative “ways to be”.

The exploration of all four realms of encounter via the therapeutic relationship itself bestows upon that relationship a lived experience of its being real and valid rather than merely substitutive, symbolic, or “transferential”. Further, this focus serves to highlight the client’s way of being both within the therapeutic relationship and, with regard to the client’s wider world-relations. At times, the client’s experience of being with the therapist parallels his or her world-relational experiences of being. Just as significantly, however, the client’s experienced way of being with the therapist may well contrast with his or her wider world relations and, in this way, serves to challenge both the sedimentations and dissociations concerning who and how “I am expected or required to be (and not be) with others” or “how others are expected or required to be (and not be) with me.”

5. WHAT THE EXISTENTIAL THERAPIST DOES/DOES NOT DO

Rather than stress yet another standard technique or set of practices, existential psychotherapy argues that any over-emphasis on technique, or on practice in general, can be one of the main obstacles to understanding the client and, thus, to any truly long-lasting outcome of therapy. It is the basic view of existential psychotherapists that *‘it is not the understanding that follows technique, but the technique that follows understanding’* (Misiak and Sexton, 1973: 87).

The unorthodox and iconoclastic relational psychotherapist, Leslie Farber, stands as a major representative of this stance. Deeply influenced by Martin Buber’s notion of the *interhuman* possibilities of dialogue (Schilpp & Friedman, 1967), Farber’s intent was to shift the enterprise of psychotherapy away from a set of inflexible methodological conditions and towards a *morally derived attitude* expressive of a particular way of being with others. In this sense, Farber’s meetings with his clients could “be about” anything; their content did not truly matter. Instead, Farber’s focus centred on *a way of talking* that led both therapist and client toward a “truthful dialogue” with themselves and one another (Farber, 2000).

This notion of a “truthful dialogue” has been further explicated by the philosopher, George Gadamer. Gadamer contrasted the truthfulness that emerges via a dialogue that is not pre-set in its focus and intent by one or any of the participants to one that has been pre-set 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, 1989: 383).

In general, this receptive stance toward the unforeseen possibilities of a human (and humane) dialogical engagement requires the abdication of such security that comes with assumptions such as “doing it right”, or directing change, or of “the expert’s” superiority of knowledge and status. Hopefully, it can now be understood that this proposed stance is not some perverse belittlement or rejection of more typical psychotherapeutic enterprises but is, rather, a necessary constituent for the possibility of truthful dialogue.

6. CULTURAL CONTEXTS: HOW THE EXISTENTIAL APPROACH CONCEPTUALISES RELATIONSHIP IN RELATION TO CULTURE, POWER AND DIVERSITY

current dominant assumptions and emphases within psychotherapy as a whole. Whether this divergence will eventually prove to be the its greatest strength or weakness remains to be seen.

Even so, because of the overwhelming significance to existential psychotherapy of the therapeutic relationship itself, its potential strengths and weaknesses rest predominantly upon the therapist's ability to "stay with" the client in the relationship as it presents itself. What this implies is that the existential psychotherapist must demonstrate the capacity to acknowledge and even embrace the insecurity and uncertainty that comes with the willingness to engage with the client *as he or she is being in the current encounter* rather than focus upon who the client may have been in the past or who he or she may be in the future. This focus may challenge many of the therapist's professional assumptions regarding the therapeutic enterprise itself and, as well, may challenge the therapist's own personal assumptions regarding "the right" or appropriate ways to be. As such, if the primary emphasis given to the relationship itself may be seen as existential psychotherapy's greatest strength, this same emphasis may well highlight the therapist's lack of preparedness for, or willingness to adapt to the uncertain conditions and implications of inter-relation and, hence, expose the weaknesses not so much of the approach itself but of those who attempt to practice it.

8. WHAT STUDIES HAVE FOUND

What research evidence currently exists for the effectiveness of existential psychotherapy is undoubtedly limited. Reported outcomes from this approach include individuals being more congruent with their lived experience and thereby, becoming clearer about who they are and who they are not; the accessing of skills for managing complexity, ambiguity and anxiety; and the enhancement of attitudes of self-responsibility and ownership of choice within an inter-relational context. Some preliminary verification of this assertion has emerged from the successful outcome studies of the *Soteria* project focused upon the existentially-derived treatment of severe mental disturbances (Mosher, 2001).

In spite of the paucity of research data, it would be incorrect to conclude that existential psychotherapy is antagonistic to, or disinterested in, research concerned with either psychotherapeutic outcomes or process analyses. In fact, it has played a major role in the development of qualitatively focused approaches to research (Churchill & Wertz, 2001; Giorgi, 1985; Karlsson, 1993). At the same time, existential investigators' views of relevant and appropriate research stand in direct contrast to the currently dominant natural scientific viewpoint and its underlying assumptions principally because the questions they pose and the methods they employ are grounded in a carefully articulated, but undeniably different, set of philosophical assumptions (Spinelli, 2005).

9. NEW DEVELOPMENTS

The great majority of contemporary models of psychotherapy have concluded, on the basis of recurring research evidence, that the therapeutic relationship itself appears to be *the* critical factor or variable determining beneficial outcomes (Mearns & Cooper, 2005). However, what might be the distinguishing characteristics of such a relationship that serve as key factors to any process of change remain uncertain. While psychotherapists tend to focus on particular skills or forms of interventions, research analyses of client statements centre upon various experiential factors of which the client's experience of the "way of being" of the therapist emerge as pivotal (Spinelli, 1994; Sherwood, 2001). Such studies strongly support existential psychotherapy's foundational emphasis upon inter-relation. Further, they highlight the importance of those analyses that centre upon the means by which the "way of being" of both the client and the psychotherapist can be further explicated and expressed as critical psychotherapeutic factors. This area of investigation is one to which contemporary existential psychotherapy has much to offer.

This inter-relational shift in the focus of the therapeutic enterprise introduces a "world-conscious" moral

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dimension to the arena of psychotherapy, the lack of which has been justifiably criticised by both "insiders" and detractors of psychotherapy. The present author's current interests are focused upon the impact of such a re-focus upon the therapeutic relationship (Spinelli, 2001).

Finally, new developments in the approach have also centred upon time-limited forms of existential psychotherapy (Strasser & Strasser, 1997), and the extension of existential practice into the arenas of mediation and dispute resolution (Strasser & Randolph, 2004) and coaching (Spinelli & Horner, *in print*).

10. DIVERGENCES FROM MAIN THEORIES

Existential psychotherapy's focus upon the inter-relational grounding to all subjective experience challenges a persistent assumption held not only by most of psychotherapy but, just as significantly, by our culture in general. This is the view that the person is a self-contained unit, understandable within his or her own set of subjectively-derived meanings and behaviours. The debate provoked by these two competing views is crucial: at its heart, lie distinctly different ways of examining and understanding ourselves and the world.

From an inter-relational standpoint, the problems and concerns presented by clients can no longer be seen as being solely their own, in any exclusively individualistic sense, in that they are not derived from some internal, or intra-psychic set of conditions but rather, exist at the inter-relational meeting point, between each person and the world. Such a stance emphasises far-reaching challenges to our culture's, and hence psychotherapy's, dominant assumptions. For example, it suggests that '*questions of choice, freedom and responsibility cannot be isolated or contained within some separate being (such as "self" or "other").... Viewed in this way, no choice can be mine or yours alone, no experienced impact of choice can be separated in terms of "my responsibility" versus "your responsibility", no sense of personal freedom can truly avoid its interpersonal dimensions*' (Spinelli, 2001: 16).

The implications of such a shift upon our understanding and working with the therapeutic relationship and upon the practice of psychotherapy as a whole are as plentiful as they are dramatic.

Nonetheless, the emphasis given to the therapeutic relationship by existential psychotherapy should, hopefully, have become clearer to the reader. How better to expose and examine inter-relational disturbances and tensions than via the existing relationship between client and therapist? Such a means of exploration permits an *experiential immediacy* to all discourse regarding the client's way of being with and relating to self, others and the world. It is this "inter-relational turn", I believe, that provides existential psychotherapy with its distinctive characteristics and which infuses its significant critique of other approaches adopted within contemporary psychotherapy.

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In line with all of the above, the existential approach does not merely tolerate, but, more correctly, values and embraces the diversity of living as expressed in terms of culture, race, gender and sexual orientation. Concerned as much with the "universals" of human experience as it is with individual uniqueness, existential thought and practice has been shown to be of particular value to the clarification of various psychological factors relevant to multi-cultural psychotherapy whether across cultures or in work with minority cultures (van Deurzen-Smith, 1988; Eleftheriadou, 1994; Asmall, 1997; Vontress & Epp, 2001). Indeed, according to the psychotherapist, Zack Eleftheriadou, '*existential...analysis transcends culture, because it delves into the basic beliefs and values of the client, and examines the client's fundamental ideas and assumptions about human existence*' (Eleftheriadou, 1994: 31).

With regard to the on-going debates concerning sexuality and sexual orientation, existential-phenomenological authors such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), Hans W. Cohn (1997), as well as the present author (Spinelli, 2001) have provided highly innovative contributions emphasising the inter-relational dimensions of embodied sexual being, as opposed to medically-derived concerns of "normal" and "abnormal" sexual practices and typologies.

Further, the adoption of this model removes from psychotherapists much of their professional mystique, and a good deal of the power that comes with this (Spinelli, 1994). For example, existential psychotherapists have proposed that the problems of mental disturbances are principally rooted in socio-ethical bases expressive of intolerable inter-relationally derived anxieties rather than in organic disorders and diseases requiring medical forms of intervention. As various authors have argued, a medical language focused on illness, disease and disorder creates significant power imbalances in the relationship between therapist and client (Laing, 1960; Szasz, 1974; Pilgrim 2000).

7. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

It has been suggested that existential psychotherapy is most suitable for persons who experience themselves as alienated from the mores and demands of their society or who are at points of crisis such as confronting death or experiencing meaninglessness and isolation, who have lost their sense of relatedness to themselves, "significant others" and/or to the world in general or who are attempting to cope with sudden and dramatic changes in a variety of personal circumstances. Similarly, those who inhabit a foreign culture or who are members of a minority group within a dominant culture and society might find existential psychotherapy to be of particular value (van Deurzen-Smith, 1988).

In general, existential psychotherapy may be of greatest benefit to those clients who find themselves in various forms of transition and who are open to the challenge of grappling with complex and paradoxical issues. Clients who are open to an approach which is reflective, exploratory and deeply challenging will warm to this system. On the other hand, those seeking certainty, and who wish to use psychotherapy to drive towards a fixed outcome, may struggle with the ambiguity it embraces.

Existential psychotherapy has sometimes been accused of over-emphasising a pernicious form of individualism that is thoughtless or empty of direction and which elevates an extreme form of solipsism. Hopefully, this brief discussion has demonstrated that such views express a distortion of the most basic existential assumption: the inter-relatedness of being. As such, rather than foster an individualistic ethos that separates self from others, or the client from his or her life and work context, the existential approach is foremost among approaches in asserting the necessity to acknowledge and place oneself in an inter-relational context.

Overall, existential psychotherapy's emphasis on "being qualities" and meaning exploration as opposed to the development and refinement of the psychotherapist's "doing" skills and repertoire runs counter to

four inter-relational realms

There exist various structured forms of enquiry which assist existential psychotherapists in clarifying their clients' inter-relational ways of being. Some existential psychotherapists such as Emmy van Deurzen-Smith utilise a variation of Ludwig Binswanger's *dimensional relations* - the natural world with its physical, biological dimension (*the umwelt*); the everyday, public social relations each of us has with others (*the mitwelt*); the private and intimate relations each of us has with both ourselves and the significant others or significant meanings in our lives (*the eigenwelt*); and the person's relations to the ideals and aspirational aspects of living (*the uberwelt*) (Binswanger, 1963; van Deurzen-Smith, 1988).

A related, and more explicitly inter-relational, approach toward such investigations has been suggested and developed by present author in various papers and texts (Spinelli, 1994, 1997, 2001, 2005). This approach focuses upon four distinct *inter-relational realms*.

I-focused inquiry considers those views, statements, opinions, beliefs, demands, behavioural stances and affective feelings that express the client's experience of being him/herself in the current encounter with the therapist. *I-focused* inquiry attempts to describe and clarify "my experience of being 'myself' in any given relationship". It asks, in effect, "what do I tell myself about my current experience of being me in this encounter?"

You-focused inquiry considers those views, statements, opinions, beliefs, demands, behavioural stances and affective feelings that the client assumes exist for the other (the therapist) in the current encounter. *You-focused* inquiry attempts to describe and clarify "my experience of 'the other' being in relation with me". It asks, in effect, "what do I tell myself about the other's experience of being with me in any given encounter?"

We-focused inquiry concerns itself with the explication of those facets of currently lived experience that emerge from the immediacy of current experience *between* client and therapist and that come into being via the encounter itself. *We-focused* inquiry attempts to describe and clarify each participant's (i.e. the client's and the psychotherapist's) experience of "us" being in relation with one another. In short, it asks each to consider "what do I tell myself about the experience of being *us* being in relation with each other in this encounter?" The *We-focused realm of encounter* is characterised by its *immediacy* - it is concerned with, and expresses, that which is being experienced "in the moment" of a person-to-person standpoint. As such, it expresses explicitly that inter-relational grounding that exists (and is more implicitly expressed) in the statements which emerge from *I-focused* and *You-focused* inquiry.

Finally, *They-focused* inquiry centres upon the client's experience of those who make up his or her wider world of "others" (extending beyond the other who is the psychotherapist) and their experience of their own inter-relational realms in response to the client's current way of being and, as well, to the novel ways of being that have arisen as novel possibilities for the client through psychotherapy. In brief, it challenges the client to consider the various facets of inter-relations between the client and these others as the client imagines *they* experience and interpret them. Further, it challenges the client to consider the impact of his or her stance upon the inter-relations between one other or group of others and a different other or group of others.

The *They-focused realm of encounter* serves to extend the "world-dimensions" of the therapeutic relationship. It is an explicit stance that can be adopted by existential psychotherapists to highlight the inter-relational dimensions of existence and to counter the more common psychotherapeutic tendency to consider the client in isolation, or out of inter-relational context. The exploration of this fourth relational realm is particularly significant when, through therapy, the client has reached a point of considering and making

(Evans, 1981: xiix).

To be willing and at least in part able to be open to the uncertainties of this form of encounter, existential psychotherapists should demonstrate suitable life-experience that infuses their ability to express and acknowledge the humour, tragedy, wonder and absurdity of living, and to adopt an on-going openness towards, and tolerance for, the different ways to "be-in-the-world" that their clients express and embody.

Via such attempts on the part of the existential psychotherapist, clients are more likely to experience themselves as being heard and, in turn, may begin hearing themselves in a manner that is non-judgmental and accepting of the stance they maintain. This attitudinal shift promotes the possibility of clients' greater willingness and courage to confront the fixed, or sedimented, biases and assumptions they hold with regard to their relations with themselves, others and the world in general, and to consider how these sedimented stances may themselves have provoked their current problems in living.

3. PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS IN THE RELATIONSHIP

psychological dynamics

From an existential perspective, human existence reveals '*the total, indissoluble unity or interrelationship of the individual and his or her world ... In the truest sense, the person is viewed as having no existence apart from the world and the world as having no existence apart from persons...*' (Valle and King, 1978: 7).

When applied to psychotherapy, existential theory approaches the question of human nature from the assumption that it is open-ended, and capable of an enormous range of experience (van Deurzen-Smith, 1988; Cohn, 1997). Such a view rejects the still dominant tendency in psychotherapy to categorize or "typologize" clients or which attempts to divide and reduce them in terms of various constituents or components. Instead, it aims to remain at a descriptive and open-ended level of analysis that simultaneously acknowledges both the uniqueness of each "being-in-the-world" and the species-shared "givens" of being human that set the invariant boundaries for the possibilities of each client's experience of existence.

Existential psychotherapists take the view that the great variety of unwanted and unpleasantly experienced "symptoms" of which clients want to be cured are themselves consequential expressions of the client's attempts to deal with and make tolerable their experience of existential anxiety. As such, it is not the treatment of these symptoms that is central but, rather, it is the reconsideration of one's defensive stances toward existential anxiety that is the focus of existential psychotherapy. As Irvin Yalom has stated: '*[e]xistential psychotherapy is a dynamic approach to therapy which focuses on concerns that are rooted in the individual's existence*' (Yalom, 1980: 5).

Any attempt to remove, amend, or "re-shape" the disturbing symptoms without sufficiently exposing their relation to the client's wider way of being may well provoke for the client far greater degrees of tension and disturbance in living than were experienced prior to the therapeutic manipulation of the presenting disorder. In recognition of this possibility, existential psychotherapists attempt neither to isolate nor pathologise the client's presenting symptoms and disturbances in living. Nor do they take the amelioration or removal of such symptomatic tensions to be their primary task. Rather, together with the client, their attempt is to expose and consider these symptoms as inter-related expressions of the client's wider "way of being" so that the implications of their maintenance, reduction or removal upon that "way of being" can be considered and evaluated.

how existential psychotherapy determines change

constructed or re-constructed in and through the act (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Ihde, 1986; Spinelli, 2005). As such, an individual's experience of, and given meanings to, existence can no longer be considered in isolation or as aspects of distinctly separate and independent systems. Rather, these must be placed in an inevitable inter-relational context.

As a consequence of the above conclusion, our reflections on all aspects of human existence emerge as being subject to the constant flux of inter-relation rather than be fixed or fully definable. In this sense, they remain uncertain insofar as they always remain open to the possibility of novel definitions.

c. Existential Anxiety

If the qualities, features and conditions of human existence cannot be fully "captured" or shared, an inescapable "openness" (and, in this sense, "meaninglessness") of existence emerges. The inevitable unease and insecurity that arises when we attempt either to deny, or claim to have resolved, the inter-relational tension between the demand to "know" existence while at the same time experiencing its constant elusiveness is experienced as *existential anxiety*.

As such, existential theory argues that anxiety necessarily permeates *all* reflective experience of our relations with self, others and the world in general. However, rather than understood as being *only or necessarily* a debilitating, disruptive or problematic presence that must be reduced or removed, the experience of anxiety can also be stimulating, can put us in touch with our sense of being alive, and is the source to all creative and original insight and decision-making.

As such, the dilemma of existential anxiety is not so much *that* it is, but rather *how* each of us "lives with" it.

d. Choice

The existential idea of choice has often been misunderstood to suggest that we possess unlimited freedom to choose how and what "to be" or "to do". This view is incorrect. The choices that we are free to make arise within an inter-relational context which *situates* our freedom to choose. Rather than being free to choose what we want, when we want it, we are rather free to choose our *response* to the contextual situation in which we find ourselves (May, 1981; Cohn, 1997). In this sense, as Sartre argued, it may be more accurate to state that we are *condemned* to choose (Sartre, 1956).

Human choice is interpretive, not at the event, or stimulus, level. And even then, the range of interpretations we might be able to generate is dependent upon an inter-relational temporal context - that is to say, when, where and how each of us "is" within such contextual factors as time, culture and biology.

As can be ascertained, many of the problems that clients are likely to bring to psychotherapy arise from the unwillingness to choose the choices which are available rather than insist that other, unavailable, choices are an option. The difference between "choosing that which is there for me" as opposed to deceiving myself that any imaginable choice option is available is both significant and profound at every level of our experience (Spinelli, 1997, 2005). Quite simply, we are our choices.