

# Practising Existential Therapy

The Relational World | Second Edition

Ernesto Spinelli



# Practising Existential Therapy

**SAGE** has been part of the global academic community since 1965, supporting high quality research and learning that transforms society and our understanding of individuals, groups, and cultures. SAGE is the independent, innovative, natural home for authors, editors and societies who share our commitment and passion for the social sciences.

Find out more at: **[www.sagepublications.com](http://www.sagepublications.com)**

# Practising Existential Therapy

The Relational World | Second Edition

Ernesto Spinelli



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
Singapore | Washington DC



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
Singapore | Washington DC

**SAGE Publications Ltd**

1 Oliver's Yard  
55 City Road  
London EC1Y 1SP

**SAGE Publications Inc.**

2455 Teller Road  
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

**SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd**

B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area  
Mathura Road  
New Delhi 110 044

**SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd**

3 Church Street  
#10-04 Samsung Hub  
Singapore 049483

Editor: Susannah Trefgarne

Assistant editor: Laura Walmsley

Production editor: Victoria Nicholas

Copyeditor: Christine Bitten

Proofreader: Louise Harnby

Indexer: Silvia Banvenuto

Marketing manager: Camille Richmond

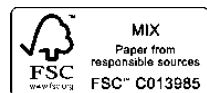
Cover design: Shaun Mercier

Cover image: *Veil 20*. Oil on linen, 2007

© Paul Winstanley

Typeset by: C&M Digital (P) Ltd, Chennai, India

Printed by: Henry Ling Limited at the Dorset  
Press, Dorchester, DT1 1HD



© Ernesto Spinelli 2015

First edition published 2007. Reprinted 2007, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2013

Second edition published 2015

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form, or by any means, only with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publishers.

**Library of Congress Control Number: 2014940294**

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from  
the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4462-7234-3

ISBN 978-1-4462-7235-0 (pbk)

At SAGE we take sustainability seriously. Most of our products are printed in the UK using FSC papers and boards. When we print overseas we ensure sustainable papers are used as measured by the Egmont grading system. We undertake an annual audit to monitor our sustainability.

*This book is dedicated to my dear friends and colleagues  
Bo Jacobsen, Rimas Kociunas, Arthur Jonathan and Ismail Asmall.*

*Thank you for your unlimited optimism and encouragement ... and your wisdom.*

*And to the memory of  
Hans Cohn,  
who, I suspect, would have both appreciated and disapproved of this book,  
and  
Freddie Strasser,  
the most wonderfully optimistic pessimist (or pessimistic optimist?) I have ever had the  
pleasure to know,  
and  
Al Mahrer  
who asked all the right questions and dedicated his life to searching out their answers.*



# Contents

<i>About the Author</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements (Second Edition)</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements (First Edition)</i>	x
<i>Notes on the Text</i>	xii
Introduction to the Second Edition	1
<b>PART ONE: THEORY</b>	<b>7</b>
1. Existential Therapy: Three Key Principles	9
2. Existence Themes and Concerns	33
3. Worlding and the Worldview	58
4. Existential Phenomenological Critiques of Therapy	82
5. Existential Therapy: An Overview	103
<b>PART TWO: PRACTISING EXISTENTIAL THERAPY: A STRUCTURAL MODEL</b>	<b>119</b>
6. A Structural Model for Practising Existential Therapy: An Introduction	123
7. Phase One: Co-creating the Therapy-world	127
8. Phase Two: Co-habiting the Group Therapy-world	166
9. Phase Three: Closing Down the Therapy-world	217
10. Addenda	236
Existential Therapy with Couples	236
Existential Group Therapy	241
Time-limited Existential Therapy	244
Existential Supervision	246
Conclusion	252
<i>References</i>	255
<i>Index</i>	266



# About the Author

Professor Ernesto Spinelli has gained an international reputation as one of the leading contemporary trainers and theorists of existential analysis as applied to psychology and psychotherapy and, more recently, the related arenas of coaching and conflict mediation. He is a UKCP registered existential psychotherapist, a Fellow of the British Psychological Society (BPS), and the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), as well as an accredited executive coach and coaching supervisor. In 1999, Ernesto was awarded a Personal Chair as Professor of psychotherapy, counselling and counselling psychology and in 2000 was awarded the BPS Division of Counselling Psychology Award for Outstanding Contributions to the Advancement of the Profession. Ernesto is Director of ES Associates, an organisation dedicated to the advancement of psychotherapy, coaching and supervision through specialist seminars and training programmes.

# Acknowledgements (Second Edition)

I am grateful to SAGE Publications and, in particular, Susannah Trefgarne and Laura Walmsley, for having encouraged me to prepare a new edition of this book. It is a great gift for an author to be given the opportunity to clarify and extend a number of his more obscure ideas and arguments, as well as add some new ones.

If this new incarnation of my book strikes its readers as being somewhat more accessible, it is largely so because of the input and suggestions of a number of people whom I am honoured to call my friends. Thank you, Stuart, Bill, Yaqui, Mick, Greg and Todd. I can't express in words how touched I am by your generosity.

My professional life has changed substantially since the publication of the first edition. Following a great deal of 'soul-searching', I decided to leave my academic 'home' of 20 years. While my leave-taking was not without sadness and more than a touch of anger, over and above anything else, I remain very much in debt to the School of Psychotherapy and Counselling for the opportunities it provided for me to develop my thinking and to find my voice as lecturer and writer. More than that, my affection towards, and respect for, the many colleagues, trainees and students whose lives touched mine during those years far outweigh whatever institutional toxicity we all endured. I have no doubt that if anything of interest, much less wisdom, exists in this book, it is largely due to the dialogues and encounters we engaged in with one another. Thank you.

Finally, as ever, a heartfelt, if all too inadequate, thank you to my wife, Maggi Cook, for her tireless support, her patient reminders to 'just get on with it' and, more than anything, her being.

Ernesto Spinelli  
London, 2014

# Acknowledgements (First Edition)

The origins of this book can be traced back to a series of seminars that I facilitated on the Advanced Diploma in Existential Psychotherapy programme offered at the School of Psychotherapy and Counselling, Regent's College, London. I am grateful to all of the trainees who participated in these seminars for the wealth of critical insight that they brought to our discussions. I am grateful, as well, to my colleague and Director of the programme, Ms Lucia Moja-Strasser, for having permitted me to present my views and ideas even though she was well aware of some of the confusion and controversy that they might provoke for the trainees.

I would also like to acknowledge the very generous and equally patient staff at SAGE Publications and, in particular, Alison Poyner, Senior Commissioning Editor. Alison's faith in this book at times surpassed my own. I hope that she will find her efforts to have been worthwhile.

I am very grateful to have been given the opportunity to travel to many parts of the world in order to meet with all manner of colleagues and trainees who share this odd passion for, and fascination with, existential psychotherapy. The informal discussions we have had have influenced and shaped this book in a multitude of ways. Thank you all and in particular to my friends from The Society for Existential Analysis, UK; the I-Coach Academy, UK and South Africa; The Forum for Existential Psychotherapy, 'The London Group', 'The Copenhagen Group' and The New School of Psychology in Denmark; the Portuguese Society for Existential Psychotherapy; the East European Association for Existential Therapy in Lithuania; the Australian Existential Society and Psychotherapy in Australia; the International Society for Existential Psychology and Psychotherapy in Canada; the Psychology Department at Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA; the International Human Science Research Group; and, of course, my comrades – past and present, staff and students – at the School of Psychotherapy and Counselling, Regent's College.

I am also remarkably lucky to have known the late Hans W. Cohn. While he was alive, Hans and I held regular 'irregular' lunch-time discussions in Regent's College's Faculty Dining Room. These were occasions that we both used to discuss our shared and divergent views regarding existential psychotherapy, engage in peer supervision and, just occasionally, catch up on the latest gossip from the existential world. I have no way of pinpointing just how or in what ways something of these discussions has seeped its way into this book. But I am certain it has.

Finally, let me simply state that this has been by far the most difficult book I have yet written. In my naivety, before I began it I was happily telling one and all how easy it would be. Unfortunately, the gods must have heard me. Fortunately for me, however, I have been blessed with friends whose good humour, encouragement and just plain insistence that I get on with it and stop moaning kept me at it. So ...Thank you to Peter and Stuart and Barbara and Charles and Laurence and Susanna and James and Helen and Abbey. And, as always, to my 'best friend', Maggi.

Ernesto Spinelli  
London, 2006

# Publisher's Acknowledgements

'Seeker of truth' is reprinted from *Complete Poems 1904-1962*, by e.e. cummings, edited by George J. Firmage, by kind permission of W.W. Norton & Company. Copyright © 1991 by Trustees for the e.e. cummings Trust and George James Firmage.

Extracts from Fromm, E *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics* © Erich Fromm and from Foucault, M *The Order of Things: Archaeology of the Human Sciences* © Michel Foucault are reproduced by kind permission of Taylor and Francis.

Lyrics from 'Hallelujah' by Leonard Cohen and 'Caroline Says II' by Lou Reed are included by kind permission of Sony/ATV EMI Music Publishing.

# Notes on the Text

All names, distinguishing characteristics and identifying details of the clients discussed in this book have been altered in order to ensure their anonymity.

A recurring attempt to distinguish between *being* and being – as in ‘every being is an expression of *being*’ exists within existential literature. It is usually addressed by use of the terms as ‘being’ and ‘Being’. My personal preference is to clarify this distinction via italics and bold highlighting when referring to *being* in its more general sense as the originating basis to all expressions and experiences of being.

Readers are likely to notice that terms such as ‘my self’, ‘your self’, ‘her self’ and ‘our selves’ appear in this divided form throughout the text. The dividedness is intentional in that it seeks to emphasise the existential phenomenological view of ‘self’ as a reflectively derived construct rather than the foundational starting point to all humanly lived experience.



# Introduction to the Second Edition

This – is now my way – where is yours? Thus did I answer those who asked me ‘the way’. For the way – it doth not exist. Friedrich Nietzsche

A few years ago, I chanced upon an intriguing journal article by the American existential therapist and phenomenological researcher, Paul Colaizzi. Entitled ‘Psychotherapy and existential therapy’, Colaizzi’s paper sought to make a case for the uniqueness of existential therapy. I will address some of his points below and in the first chapter of this text. For now, I simply want to alert the interested reader of my ongoing difficult relationship with this particular paper. Yes, it is difficult because a great deal of what it has to say is challenging. But also, though I hate to admit it, it is difficult because it confronts me with my intellectual limitations: I remain uncertain as to whether I have accurately understood some of its more pivotal arguments. Mostly, however, the difficulty lies in the risible fact that I keep losing and then finding and then losing the article yet again. In preparing to write this second edition, I came across it, told my self that I wanted to refer to it and so should place it somewhere accessible ... and then promptly lost it again. As things stand today, I know that it is safely tucked away in some as yet unknown somewhere. Only through the kind – and much appreciated – efforts of my colleagues, Les Todres, Scott Churchill, Fred Wertz and Mo Mandic, have I been able to locate and access an electronic version of it. Why this keeps happening (and only with this one paper!) and what its meaning might be, I leave to my analytically minded compatriots to decipher. Why I am writing about this ‘here it is/now it’s gone’ relationship I am in with Colaizzi’s paper is that, in many ways, it expresses in microcosm what I have come to conclude about my relationship with existential therapy in general. Namely, every time I think I have my grasp on it, it eventually succeeds in eluding me, vanishing to some unknown mysterious ‘elsewhere’ from which it can continue to tantalise me without giving away its secrets.

Even so, acknowledging the influence Colaizzi’s article has had upon me, and, as well, in keeping with a stance I have upheld for quite some time (Spinelli, 1994), I have replaced the term ‘psychotherapy’, which appeared in the title of the first edition, with that of ‘therapy’ so that this new edition’s title reads as *Practising Existential Therapy: The Relational World*. This shift to the broader term intends to make it more obvious that the views and practices being presented herein are as applicable to the related professional areas designated as counselling and counselling psychology as



they are to that of psychotherapy. Indeed, although it is beyond the remit of this text, the great majority of what is being presented, I believe, is also applicable to the areas of coaching, mediation and leadership training (Spinelli, 2014b; Spinelli et al., 2000; Spinelli & Horner, 2007; Strasser & Randolph, 2004). There is, however, a further, more significant, reason, arising directly out of Colaizzi's (2002) paper, that has led me to make this change in the title. Colaizzi argues that the 'psycho-' in psychotherapy severely limits the radical challenge that existential therapy can provide and, as well, obscures its distinctiveness from every other form of contemporary therapy. I think that this is an important point and the change in title reflects my overall agreement with it (even if I continue to disagree with some of Colaizzi's other conclusions). Hopefully, readers will be able to discern its influence throughout the whole of this text.

I have been practising, lecturing and writing about, as well as training professionals to practise, existential therapy for around 30 years now. I have the credentials, the affiliations, the titles, and the recognition that permit me to claim an expertise in the area. But just what is this expertise? And what is it that allows this claimed expertise to label itself as 'existential'? These are the questions that have pushed me towards writing – and now re-writing – this text.

In common with all other contemporary systems of therapy, existential therapy is concerned with issues of unease and disturbance or what might be called, more broadly, 'dilemmas in living'. However, unlike the majority of contemporary systems, whose primary indebtedness is allied to medicine and natural science, the pivotal focus for existential therapy rests upon a number of seminal ideas and conclusions drawn from a philosophical system which has become most generally known as existential phenomenology (Barnett & Madison, 2012; Cohn, 1997; Cooper, 2003; Jacobsen, 2007; Langdridge, 2013; Spinelli, 2005; Strasser & Strasser, 1997; Valle & King, 1978; van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2005; Yalom, 1980). Because of this allegiance, existential therapy, at least as I understand it, steps back from providing various change-oriented directive interventions and, instead, emphasises the attempt to remain 'still' with the issues under focus so that they may be opened to description, clarification, and the explication of the embodied values, meanings, 'moods' and behaviours which accompany them. Why it does so, and what there is about existential phenomenology that pretty much necessitates its doing so, is not open to simple and brief explanations. In a culture that demands 'fast everything', existential therapy does not 'go with the flow' terribly well. Indeed, one of the great mysteries surrounding existential therapy might well be this: how is it that it still exists and continues to be practised? Perhaps, as will be discussed in Part One, it is because it offers a distinctively different perspective on matters of living. But what is so different about this perspective?

Existential phenomenology is made up of several closely affiliated, but also at times significantly competing, philosophical investigations centred upon questions of existence such as 'What is it to be?' and 'What is it to be human?' Such questions provoke multiple responses that focus upon several 'grand themes' of existence, such as life/death, meaning/meaninglessness, relation/isolation and choice/determinism.

Among therapists who have been influenced by existential phenomenology, the dominant tendency has been to identify these thematic existence concerns as the pivotal features of the approach. Although they may disagree with one another on any number of specific issues, the wide range of writers who have sought to describe and delineate the theoretical underpinnings of existential therapy tend to share this thematic emphasis (Barnett & Madison, 2012; Boss, 1963, 1979; Cohn, 1997, 2002; Cooper, 2003; Jacobsen, 2007; Langdridge, 2013; May, 1969, 1983; van Deurzen-Smith, 1997; Yalom, 1980). As well, more recently, it has been through this thematic focus that attempts have been made to address the more practical, or skills-based, aspects of existential therapy (Adams, 2013; Langdridge, 2013; van Deurzen-Smith, 1997; van Deurzen & Adams, 2011; van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2005).

As I will seek to show in Part One, in highlighting these thematic existence concerns as the foundational features of existential therapy, the arguments for its distinctiveness are often blunted of their more radical implications. All too frequently, as a result, the practice of existential therapy ends up falling well within the structural assumptions and applied framework of other existing approaches, most obviously psychoanalytic and humanistic approaches. Such integrative attempts, while valuable and deserving of closer consideration, also unwittingly lead to conclusions regarding the practice of existential therapy that do not fit well with, and at times contradict, its key philosophical underpinnings. In focusing upon thematic existence concerns, existential therapy presents itself as being no different to all the other models and approaches that address the very same broad spectrum of life issues. It cannot justifiably be identified through these thematic concerns nor can it claim proprietary rights to them simply because they are concerned with questions of existence. While it would be nonsensical to claim that the various existence themes and ultimate concerns that are explored by existential authors and practitioners are unimportant, it is the emphasis given to them as the baseline or starting point to an understanding of existential therapy that, I believe, is mistaken. Instead, as will be argued in Part One, it is not these themes in themselves but existential therapy's way of addressing them that is the basis for its distinctiveness. As will be discussed in Chapter 1, this way is guided by the foundational Principles of existential phenomenology. I have highlighted three of these Principles in particular – relatedness, uncertainty and existential anxiety – as being pivotal to the clarification of what is unique about existential therapy and how its aims and practices can be contrasted with those of other models and approaches.

In addition, this text argues that the tendency to emphasise broad-based existence themes rather than existential phenomenological Principles raises several other confusions and concerns that could otherwise be avoided. Among these, a commonly recurring one centres on the oft-repeated misunderstanding that existential therapy's singularity lies in the fact that, unlike other therapeutic systems which are primarily, if not exclusively, psychologically derived, it is uniquely philosophically grounded. This is, of course, utter nonsense. All therapeutic theories are underpinned by philosophical assumptions and postulates, even if, in many

cases, these remain implicit and covert for the majority of their adherents and practitioners. It could be reasonably argued that existential therapy initially stands out from other approaches precisely because it acknowledges explicitly and utilises overtly its foundational philosophical assumptions. But this should not lead anyone to conclude that its openly admitted philosophical grounding in itself is its distinguishing feature. Valid arguments along very similar lines have been made by, and for, any number of other therapeutic models (Lundin & Bohart, 1996; Thorne & Henley, 2004). As a broader concern, the tendency by some authors to locate existential therapy predominantly – if not exclusively – within philosophy leads to the incorrect implication that it is an approach open only to those deeply steeped and trained in philosophy. Of course, it would be absurd to claim an allegiance to existential therapy without a continuing immersion in, and willingness to grapple with, *at least* the main literature dealing with its philosophical foundations. But, it would be equally absurd to argue that the understanding necessary to the practising of existential therapy can be gained solely through the reading of that literature.

Here is the crux of the matter: in spite of their many disagreements and divergences, the great majority of contemporary models of Western therapy typically share the very same, or highly similar, foundational philosophical Principles. Their differences, while no means minimal and often rancorous, stem from opposing interpretations of thematic issues that arise out of these Principles. In contrast, the foundational Principles of existential therapy are of a different kind. In being so, they approach the thematic existence concerns which shape the issues brought to therapy from an alternative, often radically dissimilar, perspective. In sum, it is not that existential therapy is philosophically grounded, but rather what its specific philosophical grounding argues that remains the critical issue.

As a brief example of this point, let us consider the theme of ‘the self’. At a surface level, both existential and other therapeutic approaches place great emphasis on the issue of ‘the self’. However, the moment one goes beyond this surface agreement, critical divergences begin to emerge. The guiding Principles upon which existential therapy rests contradict a persistent assumption regarding ‘the self’ held not only by the majority of therapeutic approaches but by Western culture in general – namely, that ‘the self’ is best viewed and understood from an isolationist perspective as an individual, separate and distinct entity. As such, the dominant ethos of therapy assumes the foundational primacy of the discrete individual subject. In doing so, it becomes commonplace to suggest that it is only once ‘the self’ has been ‘found’, ‘accepted’, ‘authenticated’ or ‘self-actualised’ that it 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 Principles underpinning existential phenomenology lead it to argue that no self can be ‘found’, nor ‘emerge’, other than via an *a priori* grounding in relatedness. From this perspective, any form of self-awareness is an outcome of, rather than the starting point leading toward, relational issues. This conclusion has many implications for therapeutic practice, as will be discussed throughout this book.

There is yet another general issue to confront. While I can readily attest that it is no easy task to describe and discuss the practice of existential therapy, nonetheless, a somewhat unusual reticence to attempt to do so permeates the approach. In part, this reserve highlights the concern shared by many existential practitioners that any such attempts might only succeed in ‘technologising’ or ‘operationalising’ practice, thereby limiting it to a rigid set of techniques which, in turn, severely contradict its aim of an immediate and open encounter between therapist and client. In brief, the argument runs that to discuss the practising of existential therapy encases it in such a way that it contradicts and misrepresents precisely that which is being attempted – a classic case of ‘whatever is said about what it is, it isn’t’ (Korzybski, 1995). This reluctance, however, also harbours another less appealing and rarely acknowledged contributing factor. This is, as I see it, the tendency on the part of existential therapists to somewhat over-mystify the numinous practice-based qualities and skills which they claim to bring to any given encounter. This latter stance has a whiff of dubious superiority that evokes a self-aggrandising sense of arcane ‘specialness’. Far too many times, when questioning colleagues as to their unwillingness to attempt some delineation of practice, I have received replies that are all too reminiscent of Wittgenstein’s celebrated injunction: ‘Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must pass over in silence’ (Wittgenstein, 2001: 90). Personally, I have found my self over the years becoming increasingly irritated by my colleagues’ near-adoration of this quote. Were it the case that practising existential therapy was something which, of necessity, must remain unspoken, then so be it. Personally, I remain unconvinced.

Part Two of this text sets out my counter-argument. I have provided a structural model for the practice of existential therapy that remains alert to the grounding Principles from which its practical applications arise. Further, my aim throughout this text is fourfold:

1. That it provides a coherent and consistent structure for therapeutic practice that remains grounded in the existential phenomenological Principles being espoused.
2. That the ideas discussed will inform and clarify for readers what it is that may be said to be distinctive about practising existential therapy.
3. That the views and arguments being presented may serve to provoke readers, regardless of the model or approach they adopt, to reconsider critically and re-appraise their own understanding and application of therapeutic practice.
4. That via the challenges contained in the above points, readers will be able to express more clearly, and to own with deeper understanding and commitment, that which is their way of therapeutic practice.

As an aid to this overall aim, I have included various practical exercises throughout the Chapter discussions which will, hopefully, serve to connect the reader in a more experiential way to the challenges raised by the issues and practices under consideration. I hope that readers find them to be stimulating and enjoyable as well as useful.

Finally, acknowledging my own concerns surrounding the potentially undesirable consequences of such an enterprise, and in an attempt to reduce the likelihood of the fulfilment of both my colleagues', and my own, worst fears as far as possible, let me state two critical points as plainly as I can. First, let us all be clear that just as there exists no single means by which to practise psychoanalysis, or CBT or person-centred therapy, or any other of the principal contemporary therapies, so too is it that there is no exclusive or singular form of existential therapy. Acknowledging this in no way makes it impossible to set out an explicable and coherent structural framework for practice that can be critically considered, compared to and contrasted with other frameworks, whether they be within existential therapy or, perhaps as importantly, with competing models and systems of therapy.

Secondly, this text seeks to reflect my own attempts to understand, describe and apply the practice of existential therapy as derived from existential phenomenology. While I would not be writing this book if I presumed that such an idiosyncratic account would be of little, if any, value to anyone else, at the same time it is not my purpose to convince readers that what is discussed herein should be treated as a 'tool-kit' for, much less anything approaching 'the final word' on, practising existential therapy.

Taken together, these two points emphasise that this text considers one particular interpretation that I am hoping readers will find to be accessible and thought-provoking. I am aware that some, perhaps many, existential therapists will find this version to be a considerable challenge to their own understanding as to how to define and practise existential therapy. It has not been my intent to dismiss nor denigrate alternate perspectives and approaches but rather to stir up possibilities and encourage open-minded – and open-hearted – dialogue. In summary, what is being presented is *a* way rather than *the* way of practising existential therapy.

# PART ONE

## Theory

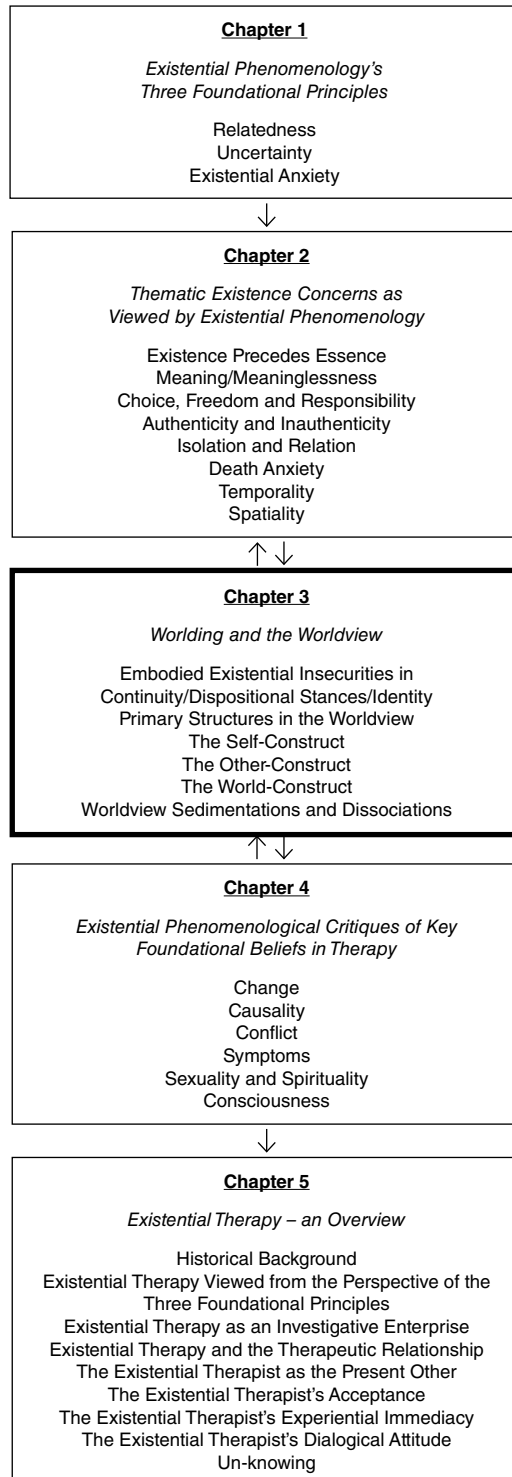


FIGURE 1.1

# Existential Therapy: Three Key Principles

## The Im/possibility of Existential Therapy

Existential Therapy is no kind of therapy. Paul F. Colaizzi

In an approach that is already overflowing with paradoxes, here is yet another – currently, the living therapist and author most often associated with contemporary existential therapy and recognised by professionals and public alike as *the* leading voice in the field is the American psychiatrist, Irvin Yalom. For example, in a recent survey, over 1,300 existential therapists were asked to name the practitioner who had most influenced them. Yalom ranked second on that list (following Viktor Frankl (1905–1997), the founder of Logotherapy) and was at the top of their list of living practitioners (Correia, Cooper & Berdondini (2014); Iacovou, 2013). Nevertheless, Yalom has stated that there is no such thing as existential therapy *per se* (Yalom, 2007). Instead, he has argued that therapies can be distinguished by the degree to which they are willing and able to address various existence themes, or ultimate concerns, such as death, freedom, meaning and isolation, within the therapeutic encounter (Cooper, 2003; Yalom, 1980, 1989). From this Yalomian perspective, any approach to therapy that is informed by these *thematic existence concerns* and addresses them directly in its practice would be an existential therapy.

As an existential therapist, I continue to admire Yalom's contributions and to learn from his writings and seminars. It has been my honour to have engaged in a joint seminar with him during which we each presented some of our ideas and perspectives (Yalom & Spinelli, 2007). Nonetheless, as the title of this text makes plain, unlike Yalom I see existential therapy as a distinct approach that has its own specific 'take' on the issues that remain central to therapy as a whole. Further, as I understand it, existential therapy's stance toward such issues provides the means for a series of significant challenges that are critical of contemporary therapy and its aims as they are predominantly understood and practised (Spinelli, 2005, 2007, 2008).



Viewing both perspectives, holding them in relation to one another, an interesting and helpful clarification emerges – an important distinction can be made between therapies that address thematic existence concerns and a particular approach to therapy that is labelled as existential therapy.

Like me, the great majority of writers, researchers and practitioners who identify themselves as existential therapists would disagree with Yalom's contention that there cannot be a distinctive existential model or approach to therapy. Nonetheless, as I see it, they would also tend to be in complete agreement with him in that they, too, place a central focus on the various thematic existence concerns such as death and death anxiety, meaning and meaninglessness, freedom and choice as the primary means to identify existential therapy and distinguish it from other models. As was argued in the Introduction, in my view they are making a fundamental error in this because, as Yalom correctly argues, these various thematic existence concerns also can be identified with numerous – perhaps all – therapeutic approaches. For example, a wide variety of models other than existential therapy address issues centred upon the role and significance of meaning, as well as the impact of its loss, its lack and its revisions (Siegelman, 1993; Wong, 2012). Similarly, the notion of death anxiety is as much a thematic undercurrent of psychoanalytic models as it is of existential therapy (Gay, 1988).

A further problem also presents itself – if *only* thematic existence concerns are highlighted as defining elements of existential therapy then it becomes possible to argue (however absurdly) that any philosopher, psychologist, scientist or spiritual leader who has ever made statements regarding some aspect of human existence can be justifiably designated as 'an existential author/thinker/practitioner'. In similar 'nothing but' fashion, from this same thematic perspective, any number of therapeutic models can make claims to being 'existential', just as existential therapy can argue that, at heart, all models of therapy are, ultimately, existential. While there may well be some dubious value in pursuing such arguments, nonetheless they impede all attempts to draw out just what may be distinctive about existential therapy.

In my view, it is necessary to step beyond – or beneath – thematic existence concerns themselves and instead highlight the existential 'grounding' or *foundational Principles* from which they are being addressed. In doing so, a great deal of the difficulty in clarifying both what existential therapy is, and what makes it discrete as an approach, is alleviated.

I believe that very few existential therapists have confronted the significance of these two differing perspectives. As suggested in the Introduction to this text, one therapist who has done so is Paul Colaizzi. In his paper entitled 'Psychotherapy and existential therapy' (Colaizzi, 2002), Colaizzi highlights what he saw as the fundamental difference between existential therapy and all other psychotherapies, that is, whereas psychotherapy models confront, deal with and seek to rectify the problems of living, existential therapy concerns itself with the issues of existence that underpin the problems of living. In order to clarify this distinction, Colaizzi employs the example of a bridge. He argues that if we were to identify all of the

material elements that go into the creation of the bridge, none of them can rightly be claimed to *be* the bridge. The material elements are necessary for the bridge to exist, but no material permitting the construction of the bridge is itself 'bridge-like'. For the bridge to exist requires a 'boundary spanning' from the material elements to the existential possibility that permits 'the bridgeness of the bridge'. In similar fashion,

Life is the unbridgelike, unstretching material of the bridge of existence. And acts of living as the segments of life are the pieces of material which fit into the spanning of existence. But these life contents are not themselves existence; they do not stretch or span across the whole of individual, finite temporality.

It is existence which infuses life contents with any meaning they have, just as spannedness infuses bridge material with the meaning of bridge material. Just as no parts of the bridge span across boundaries but rather fit into spannedness, no life contents span across space and time. (Colaizzi, 2002: 75–76)

For Colaizzi, psychotherapy concerns, and limits, itself with life issues which he sees as being the equivalent of the material elements that are necessary for bridges to exist. Existential therapy, on the other hand, should be more concerned with the 'boundary spanning' or 'stretching' of life issues so that it is 'the lifeness of life issues' (just as 'the bridgeness of the bridge') that becomes its primary focus.

Colaizzi's argument is often poetically elusive. However, I believe the issues he addresses are central to the understanding of existential therapy. Although I am not always in agreement with some specific aspects of his discussion, I think that Colaizzi is correct in pointing out that existential therapists have tended to over-emphasise the thematic concerns that make up the 'materials' of existence. If, instead, we were to take up his challenge and focus more on what may be 'the existentialness of existential therapy', what might we discover?

## What are Key Defining Principles?

We face each other in the betweenness between us. Watsuji Tetsurō

Most models of therapy are able to embrace competing interpretations dealing with any and every aspect of theory and practice. Regardless of how different these may be, they remain 'housed' within a shared model. What allows this to be so? All models and approaches contain shared *foundational Principles*, what existential phenomenologists might refer to as 'universal structures' that underpin all the variant perspectives within a model, thereby identifying it and distinguishing it from any other. Both psychoanalysis and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), for example, are each made identifiable and distinctive through such foundational Principles. For

instance, the assumption of a separate and discrete mental processing system – the *unconscious* – in contrast to that of conscious processing – is a foundational Principle to be found in all variants of psychoanalytic thought. In the same way, the foundational Principles of transference and counter-transference run through all modes of psychoanalytic practice (Ellenberger, 1970; Smith, 1991). Similarly, within CBT, which consists of a huge diversity of views and, at times, quite starkly contrasting emphases, there also exists at least one key underlying Principle that runs across, and to this extent unifies, its various strands – their shared allegiance to, and reliance upon, formal experimental design as the critical means to both verify and amend clinical hypotheses (Salkovskis, 2002).

As important as they are in providing the means by which both to identify a model and to reveal its uniqueness, it is surprising to discover that these foundational Principles are rarely made explicit by the majority of practising therapists. This seems somewhat odd since it is through such Principles that the uniqueness of any specific model is revealed. Whatever this might say about the state of contemporary therapy, what is important to the present discussion is the acknowledgement that if an agreed-upon set of foundational Principles for existential therapy can be discerned, then it becomes more possible to clarify what unites its various and diverse interpretations.

When considering existential therapy, it is difficult not to conclude that there are as many unique expressions of existential therapy as there are unique beings who engage in and practise it. Thus, it is something of a challenge to claim, much less provide evidence for, the existence of shared underlying Principles in the practice of existential therapy – unless one were to argue that the one governing Principle was that of *rejecting* any foundational Principles. Avoiding that conclusion, this book argues that existential therapy rests upon three key foundational Principles. I will discuss these below and in Part Two I will provide a structural model for practising existential therapy that I believe remains true to these Principles.

Implicit in this enterprise lies a desire to challenge existential therapists to consider critically whether their ways of ‘doing’ existential therapy might be taking on board attitudes, assumptions and behavioural stances that originate from other models but which might not ‘fit’ all that well, if at all, with the aims and aspirations of existential therapy. For example, when considering issues such as therapist disclosures and anonymity might existential therapists be unnecessarily adopting stances that are indistinguishable from those assumed by other approaches? Perhaps, with reflection, the decision to do so might well turn out to be both sensible and appropriate. But it may also be possible that, much like Medard Boss’ *daseinsanalysis*, which maintains the basic structural stance of psychoanalysis but ‘situates’ this within a distinctly different, even contradictory, theoretical system (Boss, 1963, 1979), existential therapists have *assumed* attitudes, stances and structures borrowed from other traditions and considered them as required for the practice of therapy without sufficient questioning of these assumptions. Again, in Part Two, I have provided a structural model for practising existential therapy that acknowledges and utilises various contributions from other models while at the same time avoiding

being unnecessarily burdened by the structural stances, assumptions and practices derived from them that are inconsistent with its foundational Principles.

Obviously, no enterprise that attempts to respond to these challenges should either dismiss or deny current standards and ethics of practice as delineated by Governing Bodies for the profession of therapy. If it wishes to be acknowledged and approved by these Bodies, any model of existential therapy must remain situated within the facticity of their professional rules and regulations. As such, there is nothing considered or discussed in this text that does not adhere to currently existing standards of practice as presented by the major UK and international Professional Bodies. Nonetheless, at its broadest level, the model under discussion seeks to bring back to contemporary notions of therapy a stance that re-emphasises a crucial aspect that is contained within the original meaning of *therapeia* – namely, the enterprise of ‘attending to’ another via the attempt to stand beside, or with, that other as he or she is being and acts in or upon the world (Evans, 1981). Although I believe this notion to be a broadly shared enterprise of all existential therapists, why they should take this stance is best clarified when linked to the foundational Principles of the approach.

Which leads to the obvious question: Just what are existential therapy’s foundational Principles?

## Existential Therapy’s Three Foundational Principles

What is spoken is never, and in no language, what is said. Martin Heidegger

Existential phenomenology, as a unique system of philosophically attuned investigation, arose in the early years of the twentieth century. Although it is composed of many interpretative strands and emphases, at its heart is the attempt to grapple with the dilemma of dualism. Dualism has multiple manifestations: the distinctiveness of mind and matter – or lack of it – has been the source of centuries-spanning ongoing debates between idealists and materialists. Such debates, in turn, have confronted issues centred upon everything from the nature of reality in general, to the (assumed) dichotomy between consciousness and the brain, self and other, intellect and emotion, good and evil, male and female and so forth. From the standpoint of structured investigation, which is the hallmark of Western science, dualistic debates have focused on the interplay between the ‘subject’ (the observer/investigator) and the ‘object’ (the observed/the focus of investigation) and whether claims made regarding truly objective data entirely detached from the investigator’s influence are valid and reliable.

Yet another, somewhat different, aspect of dualism can be seen in contemporary theories of physics wherein two mutually exclusive mechanisms are *equally* required for the most adequate understanding of a particular principle. Theories addressing the wave–particle duality of matter would be an example of this (Selleri, 2013). It is important to recognise that this second expression of dualism

differs significantly from the others in that it does not adopt the more prevalent 'either/or' stance that separates the contradictory categories under focus. Instead, the contradictory categories are viewed from a 'both/and' stance of necessary complementary co-existence.

This 'both/and' perspective is uncommon in Western thought. We prefer our dualities to be mutually exclusive and separate rather than complementary and often paradoxical. Our language is so significantly geared toward this preference that, when seeking to express a 'both/and' stance, it exacerbates the dilemma by imposing the terminology of contradiction/separatism upon that of complementarity/paradox. For example, other than via mathematics, it seems to be impossible to express the complementary/paradoxical view of 'wave-particle theory' without resorting to contradictory/separatist language.

I raise this last point because it highlights a critical dilemma. Existential phenomenology has often been presented as an approach that has sought to remove the dominance of dualism from our thought and practice. While not incorrect, this conclusion often leads to the assumption that existential phenomenology is linked entirely to monist perspectives which deny any apparent dualism through the reductive emphasis upon a single unifying mechanism or substance. For example, dominant monist stances on body-mind dualism insist that either no truly distinct and separate 'mind' exists and all seemingly mental phenomena are solely materially (i.e. brain-) derived or that mental phenomena can be identified but only as outcomes of (admittedly complex) brain activity. Following this monist stance, neuroscientists are broadly in agreement that consciousness is the electrical activity of cortex neurons that have been assembled in a series of inter-connecting networks (Smythies, 2014).

While many would argue that an existential phenomenological perspective rejects dualism and in some way must espouse some sort of monist position, I don't think that such a hard-line stance is necessary to adopt without diminishing the impact of its challenges. Instead, I would like to suggest that existential phenomenology's foundational perspective, being neither exclusively idealist nor exclusively materialist, is much more akin to that of the complementary/paradoxical stance adopted by theoretical physics. In promoting this 'both/and' perspective, it addresses dualist concerns without favouring one aspect of the perceived duality over the other but, rather, by arguing that the dual opposites co-exist equally and inseparably as mutually influencing continuum *polarities*. For instance, from this existential phenomenological perspective, mind-body dualism shifts away from 'either/or' debates which prioritise one component over the other, and attempts to give equal value to seemingly separately existing components (i.e. mind *and* body) by arguing for a paradoxically 'indivisible dualism' (i.e. 'mindbody' or 'bodymind') that is expressed via polarities.

Nonetheless, this proposed shift retains the same problems of language as were noted in the attempts by contemporary physics to address various theories such as those that consider matter from wave-particle perspectives. The English language, for example, seems to be structured in ways that are inimical to the