

RUNNING HEAD: EXISTENTIAL THEORIES

Existential and Humanistic Theories

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**In Wong, P. T. P. (2005). Existential and humanistic theories. In J. C. Thomas, & D. L. Segal (Eds.), *Comprehensive Handbook of Personality and Psychopathology* (pp. 192-211). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.**

## ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the historical roots of existential and humanistic theories and then describes four specific theories: European existential-phenomenological psychology, Logotherapy and existential analysis, American existential psychology and American humanistic psychology. After examining these theories, the chapter presents a reformulated existential-humanistic theory, which focuses on goal-striving for meaning and fulfillment. This meaning-centered approach to personality incorporates both negative and positive existential givens and addresses four main themes: (a) Human nature and human condition, (b) Personal growth and actualization, (c) The dynamics and structure of personality based on existential givens, and (d) The human context and positive community. The chapter then reviews selected areas of meaning-oriented research and discusses the vital role of meaning in major domains of life.

## EXISTENTIAL AND HUMANISTIC THEORIES

Existential and humanistic theories are as varied as the progenitors associated with them. They are also separated by philosophical disagreements and cultural differences (Spinelli, 1989, 2001). Nevertheless, they all share some fundamental assumptions about human nature and human condition that set them apart from other theories of personality. The overarching assumption is that individuals have the freedom and courage to transcend existential givens and biological/environmental influences to create their own future. Secondly, they emphasize the phenomenological reality of the experiencing person. Thirdly, they are holistic in their focus on the lived experience and future aspirations of the whole person in action and in context. Finally, they attempt to capture the high drama of human existence – the striving for survival and fulfillment in spite of the human vulnerability to dread and despair.

This particular perspective raises several questions relevant to the struggles and challenges faced by all people: What is the point of striving towards a life goal, when death is the inevitable end? How can people find meaning and fulfillment in the midst of failures, sufferings and chaos? How can they realize their potential and become fully functioning? What is the primary, unifying motivation that keeps them going in spite of setbacks and difficulties?

Generally, European existentialists (e.g., Heidegger, Biswanger) tend to be pessimistic in their emphasis on the negative existential givens, such as the dread of nothingness and anxiety about meaninglessness. American humanistic psychologists (e.g., Maslow,

Rogers), on the other hand, tend to be optimistic in their focus on the positive existential givens, such as growth-orientation and self-actualization.

The meaning-centered approach integrates both points of view. Thus, personality dynamics stem from the conflict between negative and positive existential givens. The choices individuals make in resolving the inner conflict result in different personalities. The structure of personality is viewed primarily as a life story situated in a particular context. The human story is about the lived experience of individuals searching for meaning and fulfillment in a world that is beyond comprehension and control.

The present chapter reviews the historical roots of existential and humanistic theories, critiques the major existential and humanistic models before articulating the meaning-centered approach as a reformulated existential-humanistic theory. The chapter then presents the empirical evidence and discusses the practical implications of the meaning-centered approach.

Reasons for re-formulating the existential-humanistic theory include:

1. Provide a more balanced and realistic view of the human condition by recognizing the ongoing conflicts between the positive and negative existential givens
2. Need a common existential-humanistic theory capable of explaining both the best and worst of human behaviors
3. Need to clarify and operationalize important existential and humanistic concepts
4. Reframe the crucial issues of existential, humanistic psychology in terms of the human struggle for survival and fulfillment in a chaotic and difficult world

5. Facilitate rapprochement between qualitative and quantitative research traditions
6. Bridge the gaps between existential, humanistic and transpersonal psychology by making goal-striving for meaning and significance the common foundation

## STATEMENT OF THE THEORIES

### Historical background

#### Philosophical roots

Existential psychology is based on existential philosophy. Its philosophical roots can be traced to the works of Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Karl Jaspers (1883-1969), Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). Husserl (1962), founder of phenomenology, emphasizes that knowledge begins with subjective human experience, thus rejecting scientific realism and mind-body dualism. Phenomenology seeks to describe and clarify the immediate experience, with everyday language rather than scientific vocabulary.

Bearing a clear mark of Husserl's influence, Heidegger's (1962) philosophy of existence (ontology) is sometimes characterized as existential-phenomenological. His most influential concept is Being-in-the-world. The person has his/her being or existence in the world, and the world has its existence as experienced and disclosed by the being. The world changes as the person's ideas about it change. The person and the human world are one, because they cannot exist apart from each other.

Existentialism as a popular movement in Europe began right after the end of World War II. Its main proponents are two French intellectuals: Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Albert Camus (1913-1960). Existentialism is concerned with the ontological issues of human existence, such as freedom, responsibility, and authenticity. Even though human existence is devoid of ultimate meaning, individuals can create meaning and live authentically through the choices they make.

In spite of his dark and pessimistic view of life, Jean-Paul Sartre also affirms the limitless possibilities of individual freedom. To Sartre, freedom is the fountain of hope, the foundation of all human values. Freedom constitutes us as human beings. Freedom, not biology, is our destiny. Through the exercise of freedom, we can transcend our genes, our past history and the environment. Our capacity to choose how we exist determines what kind of people we will become. Thus, “existence precedes essence”.

### Psychological roots

Two Swiss psychiatrists were primarily responsible for applying philosophical phenomenology to psychotherapy and psychology. Ludwig Binswanger, influenced by Martin Heidegger and Martin Buber, was the first self-declared existential analyst. He has been able to apply Heidegger's concept of Being-in-the-world to psychotherapy (Binswanger, 1958). Medard Boss (1963), a friend of Heidegger, was director of the Institute of Daseinsanalytic Therapy. He has had considerable impact on American humanistic psychology. An entire issue of *The Humanistic Psychologist* (Craig, 1988) was devoted to Boss.

Biswanger believes that the truth about human existence cannot be acquired through experimentation and intellectual exercise; it can only be revealed through the phenomenological methods of describing lived experiences. To study the person as a whole and gain a complete understanding of human existence, we need to include three levels or three regions of the conscious experience: (a) Umwelt (the biological world): Our sensations about our body and the physical world around us, such as pleasure and pain, warmth and cold. (b) Mitwelt (the social world): Our social relations, community and culture, including how we feel and think about others. (c) Eigenwelt (psychological world): The subjective, phenomenological world of personal meaning, such as our awareness of the special meaning something holds and our understanding of the experience itself.

The experience of being in the world points to the experience of non-being or nothingness. The dread of nothingness is one of the existential givens. However, this negative given may be mitigated by the positive existential given of yearning to realize one's new possibilities. This desire is captured by the concept of Being-beyond-the-world through transcending the world in which one lives. Transcendence refers to the capacity to transcend time and space of the present world by transporting oneself to the future. It entails the capacity to choose one's future in spite of the constraints from the present and past. Transcendence entails more than imagination and creative symbolism; it involves making courageous choices, designing one's own world, and taking actions to fulfill one's full potentiality.

To choose the possibilities for change is to live an authentic life and become fully human. On the other hand, when individuals avoid the risk of change and choose to remain where they are, then they are living an inauthentic existence. Individuals are free to choose either

kind of life. However, authenticity does not automatically mean self-actualization, because the project of becoming fully human is fraught with difficulty. Therefore, the existential guilt of failing to fulfill all possibilities is always with us. Part of the difficulty in the human project is due to ground of existence, which limits our freedom. The concept of “ground of existence” represents conditions of “thrownness” which constitute one’s destiny. One can still live an authentic life by achieving the possibilities within the limitations due to thrownness. These early existential psychologists clearly recognize the dialectical dynamics of inner conflict – the negative existential givens of anxiety, dread, guilt, and despair as well as the positive existential givens of freedom, responsibility, and transcendence. The concept of Being-in-the-world can be understood as person-in-context, because it encompasses the person’s biological, psychological, existential and spiritual needs as well as the social/cultural context.

#### European existential-phenomenological psychotherapy

Ernesto Spinelli (1989, 1997) and Emmy van Deurzen (1988, 1997) are among the leaders in existential psychotherapy in Europe today. Both are strongly influenced by existential-phenomenological philosophy. Cooper (2003) has provided a more detailed description of the British school of existential analysis and more recent developments.

Emmy van Deurzen’s approach to existential therapy is to enable people to (a) become more authentic, (b) broaden their understanding of themselves and their future, and (c) create something worth living in the present. These therapeutic goals are achieved through clarifying the clients’ assumptions, values, and worldviews, exploring what is meaningful to them, and empowering them to confront existential givens and personal limitations with



honesty and authenticity. Similarly, for Ernesto Spinelli (1989), the therapeutic goal is “to offer the means for individuals to examine, confront and clarify and reassess their understanding of life, the problems encountered throughout their life, and the limits imposed upon the possibilities inherent in being-in-the-world” (p.127). This goal can be achieved through adopting an attitude of empathy and neutrality, using descriptive questioning to clarify their present experience, and facilitating their discovery of their own meanings in spite of the existential givens. His latest book (1997) focuses on dialogues and encounters in therapeutic relationships and presents several case studies.

Both Spinelli and Van Duersen implicitly recognize the positive existential givens, such as the quest for meaning, authenticity and fulfillment of potentiality in spite of the negative existential givens. Healthy personality development requires (a) confronting and accepting negative existential givens, (b) living with conflicts and limitations, and (c) affirming the possibilities of authentic living and personal growth. However, Spinelli (2000) does not accept actualization as an inevitable tendency of the self, and points out that both wholeness and incompleteness are aspects of lived experience.

### Logotherapy and existential analysis

Different from other European existential psychologists, Viktor Frankl (1905-1997) was the first to emphasize positive existential givens. This is remarkable, because personally he experienced more horrors and sufferings than any of the other existential philosophers and psychologists. Frankl spent 1942-1945 in Nazi concentration camps. His parents, brother and wife were all murdered in Nazi death camps. According to his own account (Frankl, 1984), he developed Logotherapy and Existential Analysis, known as the “Third Viennese

School of Psychotherapy” in 1938, out of his dissatisfaction with psychoanalysis. Frankl studied with both Freud and Adler. He accepted Freud’s concept of unconsciousness, but considered the will to meaning as more fundamental to human development than the will to pleasure. Existential analysis, similar to psychoanalysis, is designed to bring to consciousness and enhance the “hidden” logos. Existential analysis refers to the specific therapeutic process involved in helping people discover their meaning in life. “Logotherapy regards its assignment as that of assisting the patient to find meaning in his life. Inasmuch as logotherapy makes him aware of the hidden logos of his existence, it is an analytical process” (Frankl, 1984, p.125). However, in Frankl’s writing, the two terms are used either interchangeably or together as a unified name.

Logotherapy was put to a severe test in a very personal way when Frankl was incarcerated in Nazi concentration camps. “This was the lesson I had to learn in three years spent in Auschwitz and Dachau: those most apt to survive the camps were those oriented toward the future, toward a meaning to be fulfilled by them in the future” (Frankl, 1985, p.37). This observation strengthened his belief that the primary human motivation is the “will-to-meaning”.

Logotherapy is a distinct branch of existential-humanistic school of psychotherapy, because of its focus on positive meaning and the human spirit (Wong, 2002a). What sets Frankl apart from Rollo May and Irvin Yalom (2000) is his unconditional affirmation of life’s meaning, including the ultimate meaning. The main objective of logotherapy is twofold: facilitate clients’ quest for meaning and empower them to live responsibly, regardless of their life circumstances. Logotherapy literally means “healing or therapy through

meaning”. It comes from the Greek word *logos*, which may mean the word, meaning, or God’s will (Fabry, 1994). Most people do not realize that logotherapy is actually a spiritually-oriented approach towards psychotherapy. “A psychotherapy which not only recognizes man’s spirit, but actually starts from it may be termed *logotherapy*. In this connection, *logos* is intended to signify ‘the spiritual’ and beyond that ‘the meaning’” (Frankl, 1986, xvii). Frankl (1986) proposes that “three factors characterize human existence as such: man’s spirituality, his freedom, his responsibility” (xxiv). According to Frankl’s dimensional ontology (Frankl, 1986), human beings exist in three dimensions -- somatic, mental and spiritual. Spirituality is the uniquely human dimension. However, these different dimensional entities must be understood in their totality, because a person is a unity in complexity.

#### Specific vs. ultimate meaning

According to Frankl (1967, 1984, 1986) there are two levels of meaning: (a) the present meaning, or meaning of the moment, and (b) the ultimate meaning or super-meaning. Frankl believes that it is more helpful to address specific meaning of the moment, of the situation, rather than talking about meaning of life in general, because ultimate meanings exist in the supra-human dimension, which is “hidden” from us. Each individual must discover the specific meanings of the moment. Only the individual knows the right meaning specific to the moment. The therapist can also facilitate the quest and guide them to those areas in which meanings can be found (Fabry, 1994; Frankl, 1984, 1986).

#### Meaning vs. value

Values are abstract meanings based on the lived experiences of many, many individuals. Frankl (1967, 1986) believes that these values can guide our search for meaning and

simplify decision-making. Traditional values are the examples of the accumulation of meaning experiences of many individuals over a long period of time. However, these values are threatened by modernization. Even with the loss of traditional values, individuals can still find meaning in concrete situations. According to Frankl (1967) “Even if all universal values disappeared, life would remain meaningful, since the unique meanings remain untouched by the loss of traditions” (p.64).

Values may lie latent and need to be awakened and discovered. For example, in the camp, prisoners were degraded and treated as nonentities. Most of them became demoralized and behaved like animals. However, some prisoners were able to maintain their dignity and a sense of self-worth. Frankl (1984) commented that “The consciousness of one’s inner value is anchored in higher, more spiritual things, and cannot be shaken by camp life. But how many free men, let alone prisoners, possess it?” (p.83).

#### Basic tenets of logotherapy

The logotherapeutic tenets include freedom of will, the will to meaning and the meaning of life (Frankl 1967, 1969, 1986).

(1) **Freedom of will:** Frankl (1978) realizes that “Human freedom is finite freedom. Man is not free from conditions. But he is free to take a stand in regard to them. The conditions do not completely condition him” (p.47). Frankl believes that although our existence is influenced by instincts, inherited disposition and environment, an area of freedom is always available to us. “Everything can be taken from a man, but...the last of the human freedoms -- to choose one’s attitude in any a given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way” (Frankl, 1963, p.104). Therefore, we all have the freedom to take a stand towards the deterministic conditions, to transcend our fate. With freedom comes responsibility. Frankl

(1984) differentiates between responsibility and responsibility. The former comes from possessing the freedom of will. The latter refers to exercising our freedom to make the right decisions according to the demands of life.

(2) **Will to meaning:** This is “the basic striving of man to find meaning and purpose” (Frankl, 1969, p.35). The will-to-meaning is possible because of the human capacity of self-transcendence: “Being human is being always directed, and pointing to something or someone other than oneself: to a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter, a cause to serve or a person to love” (Frankl, 1978, p.35). Self-transcendence allows people to be free from the confines of time and space. They are able to move from what they are towards what they “ought to be” or “should be”. Self-transcendence is essential for finding happiness, because fulfillment is a by-product of meaning: “Only to the extent to which man fulfils a meaning out there in the world, does he fulfil himself” (Frankl, 1969, p.38).

(3) **Meaning of life:** For Frankl (1963), “The meaning of our existence is not invented by ourselves, but rather detected” (p.157). It is an “Aha” experience, a moment of awareness and awakening, akin to enlightenment. How do we answer the existential question: “Is life as a whole meaningful or meaningless”? On the one hand, he avoids giving an abstract answer to such general existential questions; on the other hand, he affirms the potential for meaningfulness for every human being in all situations. Frankl (1984) suggests three ways of finding meaning: “According to logotherapy, we can discover this meaning in life in three different ways: (1) by creating a work or doing a deed; (2) by experiencing something or encountering someone; and (3) by the attitude we take towards unavoidable suffering” (p.133).

Attitudinal values are especially important in situations of unavoidable suffering. Frankl

(1969) claims: “This is why life never ceases to hold meaning, for even a person who is deprived of both creative and experiential values is still challenged by a meaning to fulfil, that is, by the meaning inherent in the right, in an upright way of suffering” (p.70).

### Existential frustration and noogenic neurosis

Existential frustration is a universal human experience, because the quest for meaning can be blocked by external circumstances as well as internal hindrances. When the will to meaning is frustrated, one may develop noogenic neurosis or existential vacuum.

“Noogenic neuroses have their origin not in the psychological but rather in the ‘noological’ (from the Greek noos meaning mind) dimension of human existence” (Frankl, 1984, p.123). Therefore, other forms of psychotherapy would not be adequate, and Logotherapy is specifically appropriate in dealing with existential neuroses.

Existential vacuum refers to general sense of meaninglessness or emptiness, as evidenced by a state of boredom. It is a widespread phenomenon of the twentieth century, as a result of industrialization, the loss of traditional values and dehumanization of individuals. Most people may experience existential vacuum without developing existential neurosis. Many people feel that life has no purpose, no challenge, no obligation and they try to fill their existential vacuum with material things, pleasure, sex, power, or busy work, but they are misguided (Frankl, 1984). “The feeling of meaninglessness not only underlies the mass neurotic triad of today, i.e., depression-addiction-aggression, but also may eventually result in what we logotherapists call a ‘noogenic neurosis’ (Frankl, 1986, p.298). Existential vacuum is not a neurosis or disease. In fact, it may make us aware of our own emptiness and trigger a quest for meaning. The therapist can empower and challenge the clients to fill their inner emptiness. Logotherapy can supplement psychotherapy in psychogenic cases

and somatogenic neurosis, because “by filling the existential vacuum, the patient will be prevented from suffering further relapses” (Frankl, 1984, p.130).

### Suffering and tragic triad

Frankl (1984) reasons that “If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death” (p.88).

Suffering is not a necessary condition for meaning, but suffering tends to trigger the quest for meaning. Frankl (1967) observes that the Homo Sapiens is concerned with success, while the Homo Patiens (the suffering human being) is more concerned about meaning.

Frankl (1963, 1984) has observed through his own experience and his observation of prisoners and clients that people are willing to endure any suffering, if they are convinced that this suffering has meaning. However, suffering without meaning leads to despair.

Quest for meaning is more likely to be occasioned by three negative facets of human existence: pain, guilt and death. Pain refers to human suffering, guilt to the awareness of our fallibility and death to our awareness of the transitoriness of life (Frankl, 1967, 1984).

These negative experiences make us more aware of our needs for meaning and spiritual connection. Neuroses are more likely to originate from our attempt to obscure the reality of pain, guilt and death as existential facts (Frankl, 1967, 1984). Logotherapy provides an answer to the tragic triad through attitudinal values and tragic optimism (Frankl, 1984):

“I speak of a tragic optimism, that is, an optimism in the face of tragedy and in view of the human potential which at its best always allows for: (a) turning suffering into a human achievement and accomplishment; (2) deriving from guilt the opportunity to change oneself for the better; and (3) deriving from life’s transitoriness an incentive to take responsible action” (p.162)

### The positive existential psychology of Viktor Frankl

Frankl is unabashedly positive, emphasizing human strengths without downplaying the difficulties inherent in human existence. He discovered in concentration camps that “some of our comrades behaved like swine while others behaved like saints. Man has both potentialities within himself; which one is actualized depends on decisions but not on conditions” (Frankl, 1984, p.157). He believes that “it is possible to say yes to life in spite of all the tragic aspects of human existence” (p.17). “Man is capable of changing the world for the better if possible, and of changing himself for the better if necessary” (p.154). Therefore, “life is potentially meaningful under any conditions, be they pleasurable or miserable” (Frankl, 1986, p.301). This affirmation of meaning is the foundation of logotherapy. However, Viktor Frankl’s impact extends far beyond logotherapy and psychotherapy. He deserves to be recognized as the father of positive psychology. His positive triad – meaning, optimism, and spirituality – have become the major research areas for several disciplines, such as psychology, medicine, management and education, as attested by Batthyany and Guttman’s (2005) annotated bibliography of research on meaning and purpose.

### American Existential Psychology

Existential psychology was introduced to America by Rollo May (1909-1994). The early history of existential psychology in America can be found in May, Angel, and Ellenberger (1958), and May (1961). May acknowledges the influence of Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Biswanger, William James, Paul Tillich, and R. D. Laing. May plays a key role in bridging between European existentialism and



American psychology. Influenced by European existential philosophers and psychologists, May (1950) focuses on anxiety as an inevitable given in human existence and recognizes a prevailing sense of meaninglessness as a major problem for modern age.

May (1965) clarifies Husserl's concept of intentionality and makes it the central piece of human consciousness. Intentionality is "the structure which gives meaning to experience" and it underlies the process of planning and decision making among several alternatives. All human beings are confronted with a basic choice between ontological anxiety and ontological guilt. The former refers to choosing the future in spite of fear of the unknown and difficulties ahead. The latter refers to choosing the status quo and familiar past practices; it will bring ontological guilt because of a felt sense of missed opportunity. One can achieve authenticity by having the encourage to embark on an unknown future.

May (1953) is concerned about the loss of traditional values and a sense of personal dignity as the sources of anxiety:

"The upshot is that the values and goals which provided a unifying center for previous centuries in the modern period no longer are cogent. We have not yet found the new center which will enable us to choose our goals constructively, and thus to overcome the painful bewilderment and anxiety of not knowing which way to move. Another root of our malady is our loss of the sense of the worth and dignity of the human being" (p. 49).

Following Heidegger, May (1961) later points out that the main source of anxiety and conflict comes from the self-consciousness of the “I am” experience in the world and the awareness of the state of non-being or nothingness. Paradoxically, in order to affirm or preserve their sense of self, they need to give up part of their self-centeredness by reaching out to others. Similarly, in order to overcome the anxiety of non-being, they need to have the courage to develop new possibilities. Freedom and courage enable individuals to rise above their anxiety and personal issues. "Freedom is man's capacity to take a hand in his own development. It is our capacity to mold ourselves" (May, 1953, p. 138). The challenge is to live each moment with freedom and responsibility. While freedom enables one to rise above personal problems, the exercise of freedom can also become a source of anxiety. In the absence of traditional values as consistent guides, the individuals are thrown on their own to make the right decisions. "Courage is the capacity to meet the anxiety which arises as one achieves freedom. It is the willingness to differentiate, to move from the protecting realms of parental dependence to new levels of freedom and integration" (May, 1953, p. 192).

Courage is paradoxical. In *Courage to Create*, May (1994) elaborates on the concept of courage, which means the capacity to choose to be authentic, to move forward and create a new future in spite of one's shadow or “daimonic”. Courage is the best expression of authenticity, and is at the very heart of the creative process, which always involves existential encounters with anxiety and fear. The authentic individuals are free to create, because they have the courage to confront and accept their self-doubts and anxiety. Freedom means the liberty to choose, to design one's own future, in spite of inherent limitations, which May (1999) calls destiny. May is able to shift from determinism to

destiny by recognizing our capacity for freedom and intentionality in spite of internal and external limitations. To May, destiny means both thrownness and the “daimonic”.

The Greek word daimon is generally translated as demon. To May (1969), a daimon is anything that can limit one’s freedom, such as sex, anger, and power. Basically, a daimon is “any natural function that has the power to take over the whole person”. It can disrupt normal functioning and drives the person to engage in evil deeds, when the daimonic system is out of balance and not integrated with the self. For example, to achieve a sense of personal significance and alleviate feelings of powerlessness, one may be bent on seeking power through violent means. Therefore, we are capable of both good and evil. May’s (1982) belief in the dark or sinister side of human nature sets him apart from Carl Roger’s humanistic psychology.

Agreeing with Paul Tillich (1952) and Viktor Frankl (1986), May (1953) believes that religion can play a positive role in endowing life with meaning:

“We define religion as the assumption that life has meaning. Religion, or lack of it, is shown not in some intellectual or verbal formulations but in one’s total orientation to life. Religion is whatever the individual takes to be his ultimate concern. One’s religious attitude is to be found at that point where he has a conviction that there are values in human existence worth living and dying for” (p.180).

In his last book *The Cry for Myth*, May (1991) continues to lament the loss of values in the modern age, and emphasizes the need for individuals to exercise their will to create their

own values to live by. In the absence of religion and God, myths may provide “guiding narratives” to make sense of our own lives and help us live authentically. His existential psychology is clearly dialectical. We are both free and determined, good and evil, alive and dead. It is through confronting and integrating the opposites that we discover meaning and authenticity.

Irwin Yalom is another influential American existential psychologist. Like May, he believes that we can live meaningfully when we confront death anxiety and other existential givens. Yalom (1980) lists four existential givens relevant to psychotherapy: the inevitability of death, the freedom to choose how we live, our sense of ultimate aloneness, and the obvious meaninglessness of life in the face of the previous three givens. These givens create a lot of anxiety, and many psychological problems arise from our defense mechanisms in coping with existential anxiety. The objective of psychotherapy is to help clients confront their fears and anxieties by engaging in life courageously and creatively.

### American Humanistic Psychology

#### Abraham Maslow (1908-1970)

One of the widely circulated stories about the emergence of humanistic psychology movement is that it began in the early 50's, growing out of a mailing list kept by Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) of psychologists dissatisfied with psychoanalysis and behaviorism. His landmark publication *Motivation and Personality* in 1954 provided a major impetus to the movement. Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers are considered founders of humanistic psychology. Historically, a number of key figures have directly and indirectly influenced

the development of humanistic psychology. Among them are Carl Jung, William James, Gordon Allport, Henry Murray, Erich Fromm, and Max Wertheimer. These individuals, though different from one another in their approaches to psychology, all share the same view in their opposition to treating human beings as things or animals determined by biological and environmental forces.

Humanistic psychology also has its roots in existential philosophy. The existential tenet that human beings are free and responsible for their existence is readily incorporated into the humanistic movement, which focuses on the personal worth and growth potential of individuals. Different from European existential philosophers and psychologists, humanist psychologists emphasize the positive existential givens – the creative, spontaneous and self-actualizing tendency of human beings. Generally, humanistic psychologists tend to have a very optimistic view of the human condition.

Abraham Maslow (1961) rejected the European emphasis on despair, anxiety and death. He was clearly the first positive psychologist, because he suggested that existentialism might provide a "push toward the establishment of another branch of psychology, the psychology of the fully evolved and authentic self and its ways of being" (p. 56). This new branch of psychology would switch the focus away from the psychopathology of the average person to the authentic, self-actualized person (Maslow, 1964). He coined the term "the Third Force" to describe the existential-humanistic approach

Maslow is probably best known for his theory of a hierarchy of needs, which consists of five levels: (a) physiological needs, (b) safety and security needs, (c) the need for love and belonging, (d) esteem needs, and (e) the need for self-actualization. The first four needs are

categories of deficient needs or “D-motives”, because people are motivated to fill the deficiency in these needs. Self-actualization motives, such as the search for truth and beauty, represent lived experiences at the “being” level, and can be called the B-values or B-motives. Maslow (1964) believes that the unifying and holistic motivational principle is to pursue higher needs when lower needs are sufficiently satisfied.

In his last book *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (1971), he expanded the list of B-motives, which now includes the following: truth, goodness, beauty, wholeness, aliveness, uniqueness, perfection, completion, justice, simplicity, richness, effortlessness, playfulness, and self-sufficiency. It is worth noting that the motive to achieve wholeness or oneness involves dichotomy-transcendence and synergy. Dichotomy-transcendence refers to acceptance, integration or transcendence of opposites and contradictions. Synergy refers to the transformation of oppositions into unity. His holistic, integrative thinking is similarly to Carl Jung’s concept of individuation, which involves the integration of opposite aspects of the personality. He is opposed to the atomistic, dichotomic thinking prevalent in the academe. In his later years, Maslow (1970) believes that it is possible to integrate experiential subjectivity with experimental objectivity and “integrate the healthily animal, material, and selfish with the naturalistically transcendent, spiritual, and axiological” (p.5).

His theory of human motivation has become the basis of a growth-oriented personality theory, which emphasizes on the inner push towards self-actualization and peak experiences, which are common to those who are fully self-actualized. Peak experiences can be described by B-values -- mystical, transcendental, experiential similar to the Zen concept of enlightenment. They include a sense of joy, wonder and ecstasy, which change

people's view of themselves and the world around them. However, Maslow (1970), in the last year of his life, realized the danger of seeking peak experiences as the highest good of life without considering the criteria of right and wrong. Such people "may become not only selfish but also evil. My impression, from the history of mysticism, is that this trend can sometimes wind up in meanness, nastiness, loss of compassion, or even in extreme sadism" (p.3).

Self-actualized people are those who have realized their full potentials and become fully human. Their personality is healthy, balanced and integrated. They are at peace with themselves and with others. They are loving, creative, realistic, ethical, compassionate, interested in helping others and fighting against injustice. They demonstrate the best of humanity as described by the B-values. They are not only fully functioning, but also transcendental and spiritual. But only a few can become fully self-actualized. Some of the historical figures identified by Maslow as self-actualized persons include Albert Einstein, Abraham Lincoln, and William James.

Maslow is exclusively interested in self-actualization as a universal motive. His optimistic view of the positive human potential raises these questions: Why are there so few self-actualized persons? Why do so many people with all their D-needs satisfied continue to lead a life of self-indulgence and self-aggrandizement at the expense of others? In his later years, Maslow recognized that his self-actualized friends were "prima donnas", who were self-centered and could not work together. "Maslow strived to believe the best about the potentialities of human beings, but like Jung and many others, ultimately had to admit that the darker, weaker side of people could never be eliminated" (Friedman & Schustack,

2003, p.330). Maslow's main contribution to existential-humanistic psychology is his emphasis on the positive existential givens and the transcendental, spiritual level of human existence. This higher level of consciousness is evolved biologically. His recognition of biological determination further sets him apart from European existential psychologists.

### Carl Rogers (1902-1987)

Carl Rogers is probably the most influential humanistic psychologist. His personality theory is basically phenomenological because of his emphasis on the phenomenological field of the experiential person. He is existential because of his focus on the importance of freedom, responsibility and authenticity. Most of all, he is humanistic, because of his belief in personal dignity and human potential for growth. His biggest contribution is his dual-emphasis on self-directed growth and conditions for healthy personality. There has been a large amount of research on his revolutionary hypothesis that "a self-directed growth process would follow the provision and reception of a particular kind of relationship characterized by genuineness, nonjudgmental caring, and empathy" (Raskin & Rogers, 1995, p.128).

Along with Carl Jung and Maslow, Rogers believes in the absence of external forces, individuals would choose to be healthy, independent, and to further the optimal development. However, different from Maslow who reserves the need for self-actualization to the highest level of personality development attainable by a few, Roger considers the actualizing tendency as the universal, inherent, underlying motivation to enhance the experiencing organism. Rogers is holistic and integrative. He posits that the organismic actualizing tendency involves the whole organism; therefore, it includes the need for drive-



reduction, pleasure-seeking, autonomy and personal growth. There is an innate urge pushing every individual towards becoming fully functioning and realizing their full potential.

### Rogers' self theory

The "self" evolves from the perceptual field through a process of differentiation – the result of interaction with the world, especially the evaluational interaction with significant others. The "self" is described as “the organized, consistent, conceptual gestalt composed of perceptions of the characteristics of the "I" or "me" and the perceptions of the relationships of the 'I' or 'me' to others and to various aspects of life, together with the values attached to these perceptions” (Rogers, 1959, p.200).

His theory of personality is described in his 1951 book, *Client-centered Therapy*, and following are some main points relevant to our current discussion. Each individual exists in a personal world, a phenomenological field. The individual as an organized whole, reacts to “reality” as experienced and perceived. Every organism has the basic actualizing tendency to strive to meet all his needs and enhance the experiencing organism. Therefore, behavior is always goal-directed and purposive. Since behavior is reaction to reality as perceived, the best way to understand behavior is from the internal frame of reference of the individual himself. In other words, we need to focus on the phenomenological world of the clients and let them disclose and discover the meanings of their inner experiences.

The self-structure is an organized yet fluid, consistent conceptual pattern of perceptions of the self, and the values attached to these concepts. These values can be either directly

experienced by the organism through the organismic valuing process or introjected from significant others. Healthy personality develops where there is **congruence** between their actual sense of who they are and who they feel they should be. A healthy person has the courage to become one's self without worrying about what other people's expectations in terms of "shoulds" or "oughts". This is essentially the existential concept of being an authentic person. Psychological maladjustment results when one's life experiences are inconsistent with the self-structure and are not assimilated. Whenever there is a discrepancy between the person's perception of self (an ideal self) and real life experiences (a real self), there will be problems of adjustment and personal growth. Existential anxiety arises when individuals do not accept themselves the way they are and pretend to be someone else in order to conform to other people's expectations. Incongruence often results from the needs for positive regards from others. When parents say: "We will love you only when you behave well", they in fact set up conditions of worth. In order to receive parents' conditional positive regards, children become other-oriented and alienated from their basic nature.

Rogers (1961) observes that maladjustment or psychopathology can occur when people are not aware of their own rationality and inner voices because of their defenses or distorted self concept; as a result, they make decisions that are inconsistent with the dictates of their organismic evaluations. The organismic valuing process in individuals enables them to make value judgments and choices based on their sensory and visceral experiences and organismic processing of situations. Rogers (1977) believes that people are naturally rational and responsible, and they are "capable of evaluating the outer and inner situation,

understanding herself in its context, making constructive choices as to the next steps in life, and acting on those choices" (p.15).

Those who trust in their own organismic valuing process become fully functioning, because their self concept would be congruent with their experience based on their own innate evaluation (Rogers, 1959). Somehow, this organismic valuing process has the capacity to guide people in making the right choices for their lives and facilitate their self-actualizing tendency. The fully functioning individuals represent mental health, mature personality and self-actualization, because they are free from defenses, open to new experiences, and able to live authentically. They also express their feelings freely, accept their own weaknesses, act independently, live "the good life" (Rogers, 1961).

#### Conditions for healthy personality

Rogers has a very optimistic view of human nature. He believes that "the core of man's nature is essentially positive" (1961, p.73), and that human beings are naturally growth-oriented. They are free agents motivated and guided by the universal actualizing tendency and the organismic valuing process. They are responsible and free agents, capable of choosing and designing their own futures in a constructive, healthy way. To Rogers, the human infant is an example of congruence and genuineness. Unfortunately, conditions of worth and distorted self-concept may result in alienation from one's true nature and in departure from self-actualization.

There are so many maladjusted people because of the lack of an ideal childhood and a trusting, supportive environment. Later, Rogers (1977) blamed the society for reinforcing

behaviors that are "perversions of the unitary actualizing tendency" (p.248). The problem for pathology is socialization and society. Based on his client-centered counselling, he has discovered that the therapist can provide certain conditions that help remove the conditions of worth and restore the organismic valuing process, so that individuals can become fully functioning (Rogers, 1957). The necessary and sufficient conditions for healing and wholeness are the following:

**Unconditional Positive Regard** -- This means accepting the clients regardless of the nature of their struggles, without judgment or condemnation. This will undo the harm of conditional positive regard and expose them to the healing power of acceptance, openness, and trust that come from unconditional love.

**Empathy** -- This means that the counselor is fully present with the clients, trying to understand their inner struggles and their world of meanings. It can be very therapeutic when the clients experience that someone listens to them, understands them and cares about how they think and feel.

**Genuineness (Congruence)** -- This means that the counselor is genuine and congruent and the therapeutic relationship is an honest genuine one. It means that the counselor really possesses the attitude of unconditional positive regard and empathy and this reality is communicated to the clients throughout their encounters and interactions. This kind of relationship will help restore a sense of trust in people.

Together, these attitudes will provide a safe environment for clients to (a) explore and experience aspects of self that have been hidden or distorted, (b) recognize the blocks to

personal growth, and (c) regain a sense of direction and courage to move forward with courage, openness and self-trust. Rogers also believes that these core conditions for healing and personal growth can be applied to home, school, work and community. His message on the need to treat people with respect and dignity and to create a healthy environment is much needed in the present climate of ruthless competition, brutal conflicts, and unethical manipulation of people as instruments.

However, in today's culture, with daily news on corporate scandals, cut-throat competitions and widespread violence and terror, many are wondering: (a) How could people born with good nature and growth-orientation be so mean and destructive? (b) How many people can we really trust? (c) Where can we find fully functioning individuals? (d) Is it possible for anyone to practice the three Rogerian values consistently in all human encounters on a daily basis?

Blaming the society and culture for all our social ills and personal problems only creates additional questions: (a) Since society is consisted of people, what makes them create a toxic culture of dehumanization and oppression? (b) If people are indeed as free and growth-oriented as Rogers has theorized, why can they not exercise their agency and responsibility to follow their organismic valuing process and transcend the less than ideal environment? (c) Why do people need counseling in order to get back on the track of self-actualization?

In light of the horrors of genocides and the depravity of massacre of innocent children, it becomes increasing difficult to square Rogers' optimistic view of human nature with the daily news events and our own life experiences. Still, Rogers' ideas are powerful.

Providing a safe and positive environment is more likely to bring out the best in children and adults than providing an unsafe and toxic environment. The biggest challenge is: how can we bring up a new generation of young people, workers and leaders who would internalize the values articulated by Rogers so that they can be fully functioning and help create a healthy society.

Space will not allow me to discuss the more recent developments in humanistic psychology, but the interested reader is referred to Schneider, Bugental and Pierson (2001) and Cain and Seeman (2001). Suffice to say that the most important development is the field of transpersonal psychology, which considers spirituality as the new frontier for humanistic psychology. It is also noteworthy that “existential and transpersonal disciplines have similar concerns. Both emphasize a practical focus on those matters of deepest life importance, especially the causes and relief of suffering and what it means to live fully” (Walsh, 2001, p.609). Some of the leading figures in transpersonal psychology are Ken Wilber (1997, 1998), Stanislave Grof (1993, 1998), Roger Walsh (1999, 2001) and A.H. Almaas (1988, 1996).

#### LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES OF THE THEORIES

The above major models of existential and humanistic psychology demonstrate the scope, depth and relevance of this particular approach to personality. I have already critiqued these models. Some of the main limitations and challenges of humanistic and existential psychology identified at the Old Saybrook 2 Conference (Warmoth, 2001, p.651) include: romanticizing the past, naiveté about the goodness of human nature, avoidance of scientific rigor, rejection of positivist psychology, fragmentation within humanistic-existential-

transpersonal psychology, and failure to articulate a common theory. Some of the challenges are elaborated here:

#### Basking in past glories

Many existentially oriented psychologists still bask in the glory of their illustrious masters, and are reluctant to accept any changes. Loyalty to a theoretical tradition means carrying the philosophical baggage from the past and discouraging innovation. Although the philosophical concepts, which inspired existential-humanistic psychology, are rich and powerful, their ambiguity, underlying assumptions and metaphoric expressions make communication with psychologists difficult. While appreciating the contribution of European existentialism in deepening our understanding of the human condition, Gordon Allport (1961) critiqued the European style of philosophizing and writing. He proposed that American psychology clarify and empirically test the existential concepts.

#### Failing to develop a scientific body of knowledge

Existential-humanistic psychology has often been criticized for failing to develop a scientific body of knowledge. This is probably one of the main hindrances to wider acceptance by mainstream psychology. In his assessment of humanistic psychology, Csikszentmihalyi (2001) wonders whether “the rejection of the hegemonic sway of scientific methodology, which is perfectly understandable given the ‘dustbowl empiricism’ in force when the founders were writing, has served humanistic psychology well in the long run” (pp.xv-xvi). He proposes: “To join the parade and influence its direction and pace, one must show that one can follow the tune. In less metaphorical terms, sustained good work needs to be done” (p.xvi).

Many in the existential-humanistic tradition continue to reject the positivist psychology and experimental research. For example, Van Kaam (1966) believes that “experiences such as responsibility, dread, anxiety, despair, freedom, love, wonder or decision cannot be measured or experimented with....They are simply there and can only be explicated in their givenness” (p.187). Such anti-reductionist and anti-experimental attitude prevents them not only from doing quantitative research, but also from recognizing relevant experimental research supporting existential-humanistic principles. For example, scientific studies of the personal projects, goal seeking and personal meaning (Wong & Fry, 1998) provide plenty of empirical support of the central tenet on the importance of meaning to mental health and well-being, yet these studies were seldom recognized by existential, humanistic psychologists. It is important to remember that what makes research humanistic is not its research methods, but its perspective towards human behavior and experience (Polkinghorne, 1982).

Carl Rogers has consistently insisted on the importance of objective, scientific proof. He is in favor of testing hypotheses deduced from existential-humanistic principles through experimental research. That is why there is a large body of scientific research on Rogers’ theory. We need a rapprochement between quantitative, experimental research and qualitative, phenomenological study. There is no reason why we cannot embrace both the natural science and human science in studying the complex human condition. All kinds of research methods can be used, depending on their appropriateness. Broadly speaking, the subject matter of psychology consists of both the lived, phenomenological experiences of individuals and the behavioral manifestations and neurological correlates which can be objectively observed and measured. Therefore, a complete understanding of lived



experience needs to include neurophysiological mapping and cognitive-behavioral measures. Thus, the main challenge is to develop and articulate new paradigms and new research agendas for existential-humanistic psychology.

#### Providing polarized views of human nature

Allport (1961) critiqued European existentialism for being too preoccupied with existential anxiety, anguish, and despair. Even freedom has a negative undertone because of the anxiety it generates. American existential-humanistic psychologists, such as Rogers and Maslow, tend to have a very optimistic view. Both biases have been shaped by the different cultural experiences and ideologies prevailing in the Old and the New worlds. The homeland of America has been spared from the devastations Europe has endured through the two World Wars. The new frontier can-do American attitude coupled with the Judeo-Christian values of faith and human dignity further contribute to the optimistic worldview of American humanistic psychology.

However, a realistic understanding of human nature requires us to recognize both the good and dark sides of humanity. Rollo May hits the right note when he says that human beings are capable of both good and evil. Viktor Frankl also strikes the right balance when he says that people need to develop a sense of tragic optimism. Mahoney and Mahoney (2000) propose that challenges facing humanistic psychology “include the crisis of hope and the quest for meaning (both of which must address the problems of death and the potential “evil” or “dark sides” of humanity)” (p.659-660).

### THE INTEGRATIVE MEANING-CENTERED APPROACH

Existential and humanistic psychologists are at a crossroads. They are confronted with the fundamental existential crisis: The security of status quo (ontological guilt) or the risk of venturing into uncharted territories (ontological anxiety). I have chosen the latter, because that is being authentic. The meaning-centered approach to personality represents my attempt to bridge the gaps between existential, humanistic and transpersonal disciplines through the unifying construct of meaning. It is also an attempt to overcome some of the limitations discussed earlier. Clearly, the concept of meaning plays a vital role in all the existential-humanistic models. The phenomenological psychologists focus on meaning, because they believe that human beings respond to the meanings of events, and not events themselves. Viktor Frankl and other existential analysts make the important claim that it is the “will to meaning” that characterizes us as human beings. The humanistic psychology is built on the foundation of existential-phenomenological psychology. Transpersonal psychology is interested in the meaning of spirituality.

Elsewhere (Wong, 2004a), I have pointed out that the existential-humanist psychology for the 21<sup>st</sup> century as I envision it, should be “the mature, positive psychology of how to live and die well in spite of the conflicts and tensions that pervade human existence”. I have identified four major themes for the integrative existential psychology:

1. **Human nature and human existence:** What is a human being? What does it mean to exist and live as a human being? What sets us apart from infrahuman animals? What are the unique human characteristics and potentials that enable us to rise above the laws of the jungle?
2. **Personal growth and actualization:** What is human potential? How can we fulfill our potential? How can we become authentic and fully functioning? How can we

maintain a passion for living, when things are not going well? How can we function fully, develop our full potential, and remain optimistic in an uncertain and oppressive environment?

3. **The dynamics and structure of personality:** What are the underlying dynamics of human motivations? What are the positive and negative existential givens and how do they interact? What is the structure of human existence in all its complexity and duality?
4. **The human context and positive community:** What are the external forces that shape the phenomenological field and the human condition? What are the social and cultures forces contributing to war and violence? What needs to be done to create a safe, trusting, and caring community conducive to human growth?

In order to address the above questions and develop the kind of compassionate, positive, and pragmatic existential-humanistic psychology for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we need to step out of the long shadows of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Husserl and Sartre, and develop a more inclusive and more scientific identity. The present meaning-centered approach does not see any contradiction between the holistic, phenomenological study of the whole person and the quantitative experimental research on specific psychological attributes and processes, because both approaches are needed to enrich our understanding of human existence. Life is full of paradoxes, puzzles and mysteries; no single approach can answer all the questions. Therefore, we need creative, innovative methods to illuminate the seemingly incomprehensible, inexplicable wonders and horrors of human existence.

The following are a set of assumptions and propositions, which can be subjected to empirical research and hypothesis-testing. It is hoped that an open-minded approach will

encourage systematic, rigorous research to build up a body of scientific knowledge regarding the four major themes pertaining to human existence.

#### Basic assumptions and postulates

1. Humans are bio-psycho-social-spiritual beings: The center of self is spiritual, because it encompasses the defiant human spirit, core values/beliefs, and the deep-seated yearning for meaning, fulfillment and transcendence.
2. Humans are meaning-seeking and meaning-making creatures, living in a world of meaning. They seek cognitive and existential understanding of events through causal attributions and existential attributions (Wong & Weiner, 1982). They create meaning through choices, actions and commitments to certain life goals. They live and operate in the human world of meaning (Adler, 1958). Bruner (1990) points out that without meanings, “we would be lost in a murk of chaotic experience and probably would not have survived as a species in any case” (p.56).
3. Humans are moral agents capable of making moral choices, because of their innate conscience, spiritual awareness and socialization (May, 1953).
4. Humans have two primary motivations: (a) To survive, and (b) To find meaning and happiness. The survival instinct makes the meaning quest possible, while the intentional goal striving for meaning and happiness provides the reasons for survival in difficult times (Wong, 1998a).
5. Humans are hard-wired for community and spirituality (Adler, 1964, Frankl, 1986). Love God and love others are major sources of meaning (Wong, 1998a), which transcend selfish interests.

6. The overriding personal structure is fluid and narrative in nature (Gergen, 1985; Sarbin, 1986). Each individual life is a story (McAdams, 1993; Schank, 1990).
7. The overriding dynamics of personality stem from conflicts between opposing forces within the person. This is because humans are dialectical systems consisting of both negative and positive existential givens. The negative existential givens (e.g., meaninglessness, despair, fear of death) are counteracted by positive existential givens (e.g., quest for meaning, the defiant human spirit and faith in God or Higher Power). The dialectical process is an essential part of human beings as psychological agents (Rychlak, 1998).
8. The dynamics of personality also stem from conflicts between needs and life goals, which compete for attention and allocation of limited resources.
9. Humans have the freedom and responsibility to choose their own future, even though such freedom is often limited by external and internal constraints.
10. Humans are capable of personal growth and actualization when they choose to live authentically, responsibly and pursue life goals that transcend self-interest.
11. Healthy personality is likely to develop when there is a healthy balance between positive and negative existential givens and between competing needs and life goals.
12. Humans are capable of self-destruction and disintegration when they choose to live inauthentically, irresponsibly, and pursue self-centered life goals.
13. Humans are capable of evil when they over-react negative existential givens. For example, those who ruthlessly pursue power as their life goal may be overreacting to feelings of helplessness and vulnerability (Fromm, 1973).

14. Pathology is likely to develop when negative existential givens far exceed positive givens or when one is fixated on only one life goal or one human need.
15. Human freedom is possible because of our capacity to transcend biological, environmental and historical influences. It is also because of our capacity for imagination, intentionality, self-distancing and self-transcendence.
16. All humans have the courage to do what is right and meaningful, to live authentically, and to pursue their dreams. Existential courage stems from self-transcendence, the defiant human spirit and a sense of moral agency.
17. Positive, healing conditions (trusting, supportive, and caring) bring out the best in humanity because they strengthen the positive existential givens and weaken the negative givens; negative, toxic conditions (oppressive, suspicious, and fearful) bring out the worst in humanity, because they strengthen the negative givens and weaken the positive givens.
18. The principle of reinforcement, both direct and vicarious, plays an important role in influencing one's values, habits, attitudes, actions and the choice of life goals.

These 18 principles are part of the existential-humanistic psychology and mainstream psychology. Reviewing empirical evidence of each of above postulates would be beyond the scope of this chapter. Some of the research support can be found in the section on **Research in Support of and Against the Theory**. However, the best test of any psychological theory needs to be based on four criteria: (a) Self-validation – Does it resonate with my lived experience? (b) Inter-subject validation – Is there inter-subject agreement regarding the lived experience? (c) Historical cross-validation – Is it consistent with the historical, collective lived experience of humanity? (d) Empirical cross-validation

– Is it supported by qualitative and quantitative research? The reformulated existential-humanistic theory will be judged according to these four criteria.

### Types of personality

From the perspective of a meaning-centered approach, personality structure can be described both in terms of functional components and narrative structures. The components are variables that can be quantified and measured; they include cognitive schemas, attitudes, traits, interpersonal styles, values, beliefs and personal meaning systems. The narrative structures are organized as life stories with its leitmotifs, plots, cast of characters, roles, conflicts and crises. Personality as a life story can be studied through personal documents, life histories, psychobiography, phenomenology and other narrative tools. The narrative structures of personality can be described in terms of themes, typologies, metaphors and myths.

However, an existential theory of personality is primarily a dynamic, motivational theory, because what ultimately shape personality development are internal dynamics, both conscious and unconscious. These dynamics are mostly related to conflict between positive and negative existential givens. The following illustrate how various types of personality can be derived and described in terms of these existential dynamics:

#### The dynamics of pursuing different sources of meaning

This can be studied through Wong's Personal Meaning Profile (1998a), which identifies seven sources of meaning: achievement, relationship, intimacy, religion, self-acceptance, self-transcendence, and fair treatment. Personality can be measured by either the overall

profile or the dominant source of meaning. For example, those whose lives are devoted almost exclusively to religion can be classified as the religious type. Similarly, those who are consumed by achievement can be classified as the ambitious type.

The dynamics of conflict between negative and positive existential givens

This is another way of providing a typology of personality. For example, Wong's existential model of tragic optimism (Leung, et al., 2002; Wong, 2004b) encompasses both negative existential givens and positive existential givens. The negative existential givens are measured by the realistic pessimism of accepting the "valley" experiences of human existence and the dark side of human nature. The positive existential givens are measured by idealistic optimism consisted of: affirmation of meaning, faith in God, self-transcendence and existential courage. As a result, we have four types of personality:

1. **Pessimists** who are high in pessimism and low in optimism. They tend to be vulnerable to depression and helplessness. They have poor self-concept and give up readily. They also have low levels of subjective well-being.
2. **Tragic heroes** who are high in both pessimism and optimism. They remain hopeful even when the situation looks hopeless. They stay the course, keep the faith, and remain confident about the future in spite of setbacks, overwhelming odds and self-doubts. Their resolve and courage come from baptism by fire.
3. **Pollyannas** who are low in pessimism and high in optimism. They tend to see the glass as half full and underestimate the seriousness of presenting problems, epitomize the benefits of positive illusions. But there are limits to their optimism,



which may unravel in conditions of unrelenting and uncontrollable traumas, such as the Nazi death camps.

4. **Followers** who are low in both pessimism and optimism. They are not optimistic about their own future, because, as conformists, they have surrendered their future to their bosses out of fear. However, they are not very pessimistic, because they know that their submission to the leadership will at least earn them some security in terms of meeting their basic needs.

#### The dynamics of different combinations of motivations

The motivation for personal meaning (PM) and the motivation for social interest (SI) can be combined to yield four types of personality.

1. Hi PM and Hi SI: The actualizers/heroes – They seek to live authentically and fulfill their calling. Their personal meaning is self-transcendent and derives from their sense of mission to serve others. Their passion for their mission leaves little room for selfish gains. They do not just seek glory and power; they are on a mission to serve a higher purpose. They seek truth, justice, goodness and beauty, whatever the cost. They are Abraham Lincoln, Van Gough, Beethoven, Leo Tolstoy, Feodor Dostoevsky, Albert Schweitzer; Martin Luther King, Jr., and Henri Nouwen. The world became a better place because of their sacrifices.
2. Hi PM Lo SI: The terminators/deceivers – They seek to achieve their personal ambitions without any regards to others. Their personal meaning is solely based on their blind ambition for power and fame. They resort to any means to further their personal ambitions, which include deception, manipulation and destroying their

opponents without any mercy. Many politicians and corporation CEOs, and religious leaders can be so described. Psychopaths and tyrants also belong to this destructive personality type.

3. Lo PM Hi SI: Devotees/activists – Their low sense of personal meaning is reflected in the fact that they do not really know who they are and what to do with their lives. But they do have some interest in larger social causes. As a result, they avoid having to make personal decisions for their own lives by getting deeply involved in some sort of political, religious or activist organizations. They are likely candidates to be cult members and political groupies.
4. Lo PM Lo SI: Escapists/victims – They find life devoid of meaning and they have no interest in others. They generally escape freedom and responsibility through addiction or pleasure seeking. They tend to be aimless drifters, who survive on a series of temporary jobs and Government assistance. Acting as victims, they blame others, bad luck and circumstances for their misery.

#### The dynamics of pursuing different levels of needs

Maslow's **hierarchy model of needs** represents the ideal or rational progression through the different levels of needs. However, it needs to be complemented by a **conflict model of needs**. I propose that under many conditions, different levels of human needs compete for immediate attention, and individuals may choose to bypass a lower level need in order to meet a higher level need. For example, many have risked and lost their lives in pursuing the ideal of freedom by trying to escape from totalitarian states. Some people may choose to be fixated at a lower level of needs instead of the ideal of self-actualization. For example,

many individuals squander their lives in drug addiction, in spite of their professional success,

This conflict model also predicts that for various reasons, such as early childhood experience, traumatic experience, past reinforcement history, or ideology, that some individuals may become fixated at one specific level to the point of being consumed by it. This selective overblown fixation at one level at the expense of other levels is similar to Rollo May's daimonics and may result in following extreme types of personality:

1. The sacrificial actualizers who would give up everything, including their lives, in order to realize their dreams and fulfill their mission. They include the starving artists, religious zealots, martyrs, terrorists, and revolutionaries. They have the same all-consuming passion, the same selfless dedication, but totally different outcomes. It all hinges on the choices one makes. If we strive to achieve the B-values proposed by Maslow, we are likely to make a positive contribution to humanity. However, if we strive for power and domination (Fromm 1973), whether in the name of nationalism (Hitler), ideology (Stalin) or religion (Osama bin Laden), we are likely to have a negative impact on society.
2. The status seekers who would do anything to make a name for themselves and gain respect. They constantly seek recognition and publicity. They are likely to be the vanity-consumers, social ladder climbers, impersonators, and hypocrites who consistently make themselves look better than they really are.

3. The anxious clingers who have a desperate need for love and attachment. They would give up everything for acceptance and intimacy. Paradoxically, they go from one failed relationship to another because they love too much.
4. The safety fanatics who are overly anxious about personal safety and future security that they give up many opportunities in order to play safe. The recluse millionaire Howard Hughes is an extreme example. Their concern for physical safety may generalize to matters of personal security. For example, safety-conscious individuals tend to be conformists and compromisers to avoid confrontation. They have the habit of saving for the rainy days. Given a choice, they consistently choose status quo over new adventures.
5. The hedonists who devote their life to pursuing physical pleasures. They live to eat rather than eat to live and their stomach is their God. They are also obsessed with sex not as an expression of intimacy, but as a recreation. Sexual exploits become their way of finding happiness and personal significance.

The above conceptual analysis shows that the meaning-centered approach to personality can generate innovative research ideas on personality and provide fresh insights into maladaptive as well as healthy behaviors. For example, both constructive and destructive behaviors can be predicted based on the 18 postulates. Systematic research is needed to find out how external variables and personality traits interact to predict the likely pattern of meaning quest. Culture, socialization and reinforcement history are likely to have an influence on the selection of life goals, sources of meaning, and pathways to meaning. The meaning-centered approach to personality has broad implications for research and

applications. It shows that an exciting new vista opens up once we dare to step out of the shadow and stand on the shoulders of the giants in existential-humanistic psychology.

#### RESEARCH IN SUPPORT OF AND AGAINST THE THEORIES

Much of the research support for various existential, humanistic psychotherapy can be found in Schneider, Bugental and Pierson (2001) and Cain and Seeman (2001). Empirical support for logotherapy and existential analysis will appear in a special anthology edited by Batthyany and Levinson (2005) to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of Viktor Frankl. Empirical support for meaning-centered counselling can be found in Wong (1998b).

As stated earlier regarding failure to build a scientific body of knowledge, many of the concepts and principles of existential, humanistic psychology are too ambiguous or imprecise to be tested empirically. Therefore, scientific support for existential and humanistic theories are either weak or non-existent. But it also means that there is no clear scientific evidence against existential and humanistic theories.

However, when we move on to the reformulated existential-humanistic theory, we enter into a very different terrain of research. There has been rather extensive research on the role of meaning in personal, motivation and lifespan development (Reker & Chamberlain, 2001; Wong & Fry, 1998). A meaning-centered approach to personality has a broad base of empirical support and goes beyond Emmons' (1986) personal goal striving approach to personality. Space limitation only allows me to highlight a few areas.

The positive role of meaning in happiness and subjective well-being

Viktor Frankl (1969) has consistently stated that happiness will elude us if we directly pursue it, but it will come in through the back door, if we pursue meaning in life. There are now literally hundreds of studies which support Frankl's existential insights (Batthyany & Guttman, 2005). We now know that meaning is an essential component of happiness and well-being (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995), and that happiness is an essential component of personal meaning (Wong, 1998a). Researchers have reached the consensus that the good life of happiness and fulfillment cannot be found in wealth and possessions, and that it can only be found through living a meaningful life. Such a life would entail helping others, setting long-term life goals, enjoying good relationships, having a religious faith, seeking spiritual experiences, making a contribution to society, and having a philosophy of life (Myers, 1992, 2000; Diener, 2000). This existential view of happiness can also explain why people find contentment and fulfillment even when they are suffering (Wong, 2004b). Ryan and Deci (2001) differentiated between hedonic and eudaimonic happiness. Only the latter can be considered mature, authentic happiness, because it is not dependent on circumstances or physical pleasures.

#### The positive role of meaning in overcoming adversities

Research is accumulating that affirmation of positive meaning plays a key role in enduring and overcoming adversities. Several meaning-based processes are involved in the humans' heroic effort to survive and thrive in the midst of stress and trauma. These processes include meaning management to repair shattered assumptions (Janoff-Bulman, 1999), the existential coping of acceptance and finding positive meaning in suffering (Wong & Reker, 2005), developing a sense of coherence (Antonovsky, 1987), maintaining a sense of tragic

optimism (Wong, 2004b), and contributing to post-traumatic growth (Leung, et al, 2003; Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998).

#### The positive role of meaning in death acceptance

Existential philosophers and psychologists, such as Heidegger, Jaspers, Sartre and May have long emphasized the centrality of death anxiety in human existence. Feifel (1959) proposed that research on the meaning of death and dying could deepen our understanding of the development of mature and authentic personality in confronting and incorporating death concept. Since then, much research has been done on death attitudes. Most relevant to the meaning-centered approach is recent research on both death acceptance and death anxiety. Wong and his associates (Wong, Reker, & Gesser, 1994) have found that accepting one's mortality (i.e., neutral death acceptance) is beneficial, because it reduces death fear and motivates people to make something of their lives before it is too late. Similarly, the belief in afterlife (i.e., approach death acceptance) may also ease one's dread of non-existence. Wong has also found that life review (Wong, 1995) and meaning contribute to successful aging and death acceptance (Wong, 1999).

#### The positive role of meaning in goal-striving and achievement

Humans are purposeful and goal-oriented (Klinger, 1998). The importance and benefits of personal projects (Little, 1998) and goal striving (Emmons, 1986) have been well documented. Wong (1998c) has further demonstrated that the meaning one attributes to university education is positively related to academic achievement. These findings suggest that the quest for meaning and personal significance is not an ambiguous concept, because

it can be investigated in terms of pursuit of specific life goals and projects. In sum, the meaning-centered approach is evidence-based, and represents the positive, existential psychology, which transforms suffering and death into human strengths.

### PREDICTIONS FOR EVERYDAY FUNCTIONING

Given that the meaning-centered approach to personality focuses on the real life drama of surviving and thriving in the context of adversities, suffering and death, it is clearly relevant to everyday functioning. I will briefly highlight applications of meaning-based principles to the following domains:

**Family life:** The family as a social institution is unraveling with high divorce rates, domestic violence and out-of-control teens. The existential approach predicts that family life is more likely to be healthy if the following four principles are implemented:

1. Create a safe and trusting environment by adopting the three Rogerian values of genuineness, empathetic understanding, and unconditional acceptance (trust). Good relationships between family members are likely to follow in such a home environment.
2. Encourage deeper understanding of self and other family members in order to establish more realistic expectations and discover more meaningful way of relating. “The existential approach involves an encounter between persons who are jointly taking risks in a shared exploration of the realities of the family members’ experience and expectation of each other. This requires a true openness and honesty



in the search for new, meaningful and freer pattern of behavior and relationships” (Haldane & McCluskey, 1982, p.124).

3. Emphasize both personal and collective responsibility for own behavior and for other family members. The pursuit of individual freedom without regard for others is at the root of many familial and social problems. Parents need to teach their children that there are consequences for their actions.
4. Promote joint projects in order to promote family cohesiveness (Lantz, 1996). Similarly, couples need to have shared values and life goals, so that they will not be constantly pulling in opposite directions.

**School and Education:** The teacher can facilitate classroom learning by practicing the three Rogerian attitudes (Rogers & Freiberg, 1993). The most essential value is genuineness, because the teacher can get connected with the learner only when the teacher enters into the encounter without any façade. An attitude of unconditional acceptance and trust is important, because it communicates to the learners of the facilitator’s trust in their worth and capacity as human beings. Empathetic understanding also enhances self-initiated learning, because when students feel that they are understood for their own point of view and are not being judged, they would be more eager to learn.

The teacher can also motivate students with materials that are both challenging and meaningful with respect to fulfilling students’ potential. Students develop their strengths through overcoming difficulties and solving problems. Students are more likely to be motivated when they understand that the information and skills they acquire are important for their survival and success in fulfilling their career goals (Wong, 1998c).

**Work:** The same Rogerian “core conditions” also apply to work situations. Encounter groups (Rogers, 1970) have been run in various organizations to create a safe and trusting environment. In such a positive climate, workers are more likely to find work meaningful and become authentic in relating to others (Wong, 2002b).

Maslow’s model of hierarchy of needs has been widely accepted by human resources managers but seldom practiced. However, it can be predicted that workers are more likely to be motivated, when their work provides opportunities for meeting all five levels of needs. More recent research has shown that workers’ need for meaning and spirituality is important for productivity and job satisfaction (Wong, 2002b; Wong & Gupta, 2004).

**Retirement:** Retirement represents a major life transition. To those whose self identity and personal meaning have been defined by their work, retirement would mean more than just a loss of status and income. The key to a productive retirement is to rediscover the meaning for living. Individuals are more likely to enjoy their retirement and experience successful aging, if they engage in the following:

1. Spend some time in life review and reflect on the meaning of their lives (Wong, 1995; Wong & Watt, 1991). They may gain a deeper self understanding and become better prepared for the dwindling opportunities that come with aging.
2. Explore opportunities for personal growth in terms of wisdom, maturity, and spiritual transformation (Wong 1989, 1998d, 1999), because this is the only area that is relatively free from the limiting effect of aging.
3. Continue to pursue one’s life mission, though in a gradually diminished capacity.  
One may retire from formal employment, but one does not need to retire from one’s

vocation and mission. As long as health permits, retirees need to continue to do work related to their calling. It may mean volunteer work, part-time employment, or self-initiated project.

**Recreation:** From the meaning-centered perspective, other than work, recreation offers the most opportunities to discover personal meaning and contribute to human fulfillment. At a certain level, work and play become the same. There are two types of recreation:

1. Sensation-seeking activities includes extreme sports, traveling, going to theatres, listen to music, etc. These activities enrich our lives through the experiential value of finding meaning, according to Frankl (1984).
2. Creative activities include painting, writing poetry, playing music, carpentry, or doing something for others. These activities express and discover ourselves through creative value of finding meaning, according to Frankl (1984). Creative recreational activities often develop into a career or lifelong calling.

### Conclusion

Since the meaning-centered approach to personality addresses fundamental issues of human existence, it stands to reason why this particular approach is relevant to all the major domains of life and helpful to people in their daily struggles. It also provides new insights into a wide range of personalities from the healthy to the destructive types. Thus, this theoretical framework is a promising way to study people at their best and at their worst.

The reformulated existential-humanistic theory is dialectical, because the underlying motivation is based on the conflict between negative and positive existential givens, as well as between competing life goals. Motivation stems from both the tension of conflict (Mahoney & Mahoney, 2001) and the choices one makes. Healthy personality results from balancing and integrating conflicting forces, while the destructive personality often results from obsession with a single ambition for power. This dialectical view is similar to Csikszentmihalyi's (1996, 2000) description of dialectic tension between contradictory forces in creative individuals, and Fromm's (1941, 1999) concept of dialectical humanism, which emphasizes the human capacity to transcend opposing forces between biological drives and societal pressures.

Research on the positive triad of meaning, optimism and spirituality in the context of negative existential givens and negative circumstances encompasses the entire range of lived experience. This inclusive research agenda expands the frontier of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), which is still predicated on the false dichotomy that positivity is good and negativity is bad (Seligman, 2002). The integrative reformulated existential-humanistic psychology also realizes Bugental's (1981) prophetic vision: "The existential point of view speaks of man's condition in a fashion that transcends the dichotomy of pathology and health" (p. 17). More importantly, the current focus on the human quest for meaning and fulfillment is able to circumvent philosophical divides and brings existential-humanistic psychology back to mainstream psychology. Finally, the conception of personal meaning as socially constructed (Wong, 1998a, Gergen, 1999) will shed light on development of personality in different cultural contexts. Leong and Wong (2003) have shown that the meaning of optimal functioning is dependent on the

values and beliefs of different cultures. The meaning-based existential-humanistic theory will hopefully contribute to a multicultural perspective of personality functioning and appeal to the international psychology community.

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