

## WORLD VIEW CONCEPTS IN EXISTENTIAL FAMILY THERAPY

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**ABSTRACT:** Essence oriented and existence oriented approaches to family psychotherapy are very different treatment forms. This article compares and contrasts these two orientations in an effort to clarify the basic world view beliefs in existential psychotherapy with couples and families.

**KEY WORDS:** essence; empathic availability; response-ability; knowledge richness; existential family therapy.

Existential Family Psychotherapy is an orientation to the family treatment process that is grounded in the philosophies of existence rather than the philosophies of essence (Curry, 1967; Lantz, 2000; Mullan & Sangliuanno, 1964). A philosophy of essence is a form of philosophical inquiry that focuses upon the consistencies, rules, and patterns of the world which govern the manifestation of human life (Wahl, 1949; Yalom, 1980). The philosophies of essence are considered to be valuable in the field of family therapy because the study of essence can result in scientific knowledge and the identification of systematic procedures and interventions that often create change (Brock & Barnard, 1992). Most approaches to family psychotherapy that have been popular over the last 50 years have evolved out of the philosophies and world view of essence.

A philosophy or world view of existence is an orientation to philosophical inquiry that focuses upon the creative capacities of the human being and how the human being can shape and/or respond to the material facts, limitations, rules, predictabilities, and essences to be found

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in human life (Wahl, 1949). Although family psychotherapists have more frequently based their efforts to help couples and families change upon the philosophies and world view of essence, a small group of family therapists who have been active over the years primarily utilize the philosophies and/or world view of existence as their basic understandings about helping family members change. Such therapists include Andrews (1974), Bergantino (1997), Boerop (1975), Curry (1967), Frankl (1959), Kaye (1986), Laing (1961), Lantz (1993, 2000), Mullan and Sangiuliano (1964), Satir (1967), Whitaker (1989), and Wright (1985). These therapists consistently report that an understanding of courage, freedom, response-ability, creativity, and resistance to the rules of essence provide important insights into the process of helping couples and families change. The purpose of this article is to outline and describe some of the basic ideas and concepts to be found in existential family therapy that tend to be consistently expressed by this minority group of family psychotherapists who have based their intervention methods upon the philosophies and world view of existence rather than the philosophies of essence. Figure 1 represents an outline of the basic themes accepted in most forms of existential family therapy and the family therapy orientations of essence.

### **EXISTENCE PRECEDES ESSENCE**

The philosophies of essence focus upon the logical discovery of the patterns and rules of the world that govern and control the manifestations of human life (Wahl, 1949). This philosophical concern for the rigidity of human life can result in the ability to predict, the ability to externally manage, manipulate, and instigate what is often described as strategic change and/or planned change (Haley, 1976; Wahl, 1949).

A philosophy of existence has a focus upon human flexibility, human intentionality, human freedom, human adaptability, and the ability to respond in a great variety of different ways to the essences of life (Friedman, 1964; Marcel, 1956; Wahl, 1949). This focus upon flexibility and the ability to respond differentially (i.e. response-ability) to the rules and consistencies of life is identified as “existence” and the study of such “response-ability” is generally described as a philosophy of existence (Wahl, 1949). Existential family therapists (Andrews, 1974; Lantz, 1993, 2000) are generally more interested in the ability of family members to utilize creativity, freedom, responsibility, courage, flexibility, spontaneity, defiance, intuition, spirit, mystery, meaning, resis-

<i>Essence Oriented Family Therapy</i>	<i>Existence Focused Family Therapy</i>
Essence precedes existence	Existence precedes essence
Problem before meaning	Meaning before problem
Distant objective observation	Participatory subjectivity
Clear-precise knowledge	Knowledge richness
Technical giving	Empathic availability
Reactive nature of families	Proactive nature of families
Social exchange	Unconditional giving
Present moments of time	The fullness of time
Effective social living	Authentic social living
Predictability	Surprise
A focus upon constrictions	A focus upon freedom
Logic	Mystery
Experimental research	Descriptive research
Therapist as scientist	Therapist as artist

**FIGURE 1**

*Family Therapy World View Themes* (Adapted from Lantz, J., 2000. *Meaning centered marital and family therapy: Learning to bear the beams of love*. Springfield: Charles C Thomas.)

tance, disagreement, artistic expression, and hope to challenge the essences and limitations of life. In the words of Sartre (1956), the existential family therapist believes that “existence precedes essence.”

### **MEANING BEFORE PROBLEM**

Many, perhaps most, approaches to marital and family psychotherapy are problem centered in both structure and focus (Haley, 1976). In the problem centered approaches it is believed that effective treatment centers upon first identifying the elements of a problem sequence and then utilizing treatment interventions to disrupt the problem sequence in a way that allows a healthier transactional sequence to develop and occur (Grove & Haley, 1991; Haley, 1976). In the problem centered approach it is generally believed that family change is the responsibility

of the psychotherapist and that therapist's understanding of strategic treatment procedures is the core of change (Haley, 1976).

In existential family therapy it is believed that family change most frequently occurs when family members are able to find a meaning, reason, and/or purpose for change (Frankl, 1969; Lantz, 2000; Mullan & Sangliuanno, 1964). Although the existential family therapist is concerned with problem manifestation and resolution, the therapist understands that significant and lasting change will more frequently occur when family members experience motivations to change, and that the therapist's most important responsibility is to help the couple or family become more aware of the meanings and meaning potentials that can be actualized by therapeutic change (Frankl, 1969; Lantz, 1993; 2000; Mullan & Sangliuanno, 1964). A consistent theme in existential family therapy is that problem resolution most frequently follows awareness of a meaningful reason or reasons for family members to engage in change (Andrews, 1974; Lantz, 1993; Wright, 1985).

### **PARTICIPATORY SUBJECTIVITY**

In most of the family treatment approaches based upon the philosophies of essence, the relationship between therapist and family is generally described as a relationship of distant objectivity and observation (Lantz, 1978). In such a relationship of distant and objective observation, the therapist keeps his or her distance in order to maintain scientific objectivity and to develop accurate clinical assessments (Jayaratne & Levy, 1979). In essence oriented family therapy, objectivity and detached assessment are considered safeguards that protect assessment clarity (Jayaratne & Levy, 1979; Lantz, 1978).

In existential family therapy, the relationship between therapist and client is generally described as a relationship of participatory subjectivity (Lantz, 2000; Mullan & Sangliuanno, 1964). In participatory subjectivity, the therapist manifests a relationship of encounter, empathy, emotional availability, and human connection. The therapist utilizes the process of participation in the relationship to obtain subjective understandings about the client family's goals, values, hopes, desires, meanings, and pain. Although the existential family therapist is not opposed to clarity and accurate observation, he or she believes that participation and subjectivity result in a richer and closer truth and a deeper relationship upon which to build a treatment alliance (Lantz, 2000; Satir, 1967; Whitaker, 1989).

## **KNOWLEDGE RICHNESS AND DEPTH**

In most of the family treatment approaches that are based upon the philosophies of essence, knowledge about both a specific couple or family requesting treatment and about the treatment process itself, is expected to be clear knowledge, precise knowledge, consistent knowledge, and congruent knowledge (Lantz, 1978). Such knowledge clarity is desired in order to develop a treatment intervention approach that is efficient, effective, and accurately responsive to the client family's needs. Such knowledge clarity is considered possible to achieve reactive to the scientific method (Jayaratne & Levy, 1979) and especially in controlled experimental research.

In existential family therapy knowledge richness and knowledge depth are valued more than knowledge clarity (Lantz, 2000). Knowledge clarity is generally suspected of being surface knowledge, superficial knowledge, and knowledge that is not capable of reaching and/or understanding the goals of family existence, the depth of family pain, family strengths, or the courage that family members can draw upon in times of crisis, trauma, and/or emergency (Andrews, 1974; Bergantino, 1997; Lantz, 2000; Whitaker, 1989). In existential family therapy knowledge richness and knowledge depth are discovered through qualitative, phenomenological, descriptive and participatory research methods with real couples and families struggling to achieve real and meaningful personal change in a practice rather than laboratory setting (Curry, 1967; Laing, 1961; Whitaker, 1989; Wright, 1985).

## **EMPATHIC AVAILABILITY**

In most of the essence oriented approaches to family psychotherapy, the therapist's technical competence is emphasized as the most important characteristic of the treatment process, and helping the therapist develop such technical competence is the primary training task in the family therapy training program or institute. In such approaches, it is believed that the therapist must learn to create change and that warm empathetic treatment relationships are important but not as important as technical and/or strategic competence (Haley, 1976).

In existential family psychotherapy, it is believed that the therapist's capacity and ability to allow the self to be touched by the client's problems and pain is the basic and most important ingredient in the treatment process (Satir, 1967). Although existential family therapists

do believe that technical competence is important, such competence is believed to be less important than the client's awareness that the therapist has been touched by the client's pain and is available to provide empathy for such client pain. In existential philosophy this willingness to be connected and aware of another person's pain has been described as empathic availability, creative fidelity, and as an I-Thou relationship of encounter (Friedman, 1964; Marcel, 1956). In existential family therapy, it is believed that empathic availability is the ingredient in the treatment process that allows the therapist's technical competence to be utilized by couples and families who request our help (Boerop, 1975; Lantz, 2000; Satir, 1967; Whitaker, 1989; Yalom, 1980).

### **THE PROACTIVE NATURE OF FAMILIES**

In many of the essence oriented approaches to marital and family treatment it is believed that couples and families get stuck in repetitive patterns that do not change reactive to insight, will, or family intention (Grove & Haley, 1991; Haley, 1976). In this view family change must be leveraged in a strategic fashion by a therapist who will utilize intervention methods to defeat resistance and/or family inertia (Grove & Haley, 1991). In such essence oriented approaches couples and families are understood to be primarily reactive organizations rather than proactive organizations.

In existential family therapy, couples and families are viewed as organizations who can effectively respond to a great variety of different external and/or internal problems, situations, tragedies, difficulties and/or previously learned patterns of behavior (Andrews, 1974). In existential family therapy it is believed that families and family members can utilize intention, will, awareness, courage, spirit, and responsibility to confront problems, challenge patterns, plan their own growth and change, and live a more proactive family life (Andrews, 1974; Boerop, 1975; Lantz, 1993; Wright, 1985). In existential family therapy the family is considered to be a proactive human organization (Andrews, 1974; Lantz, 2000).

### **UNCONDITIONAL GIVING**

In essence oriented approaches to marital and family therapy, positive marital and family interaction is often understood and ex-

plained from the perspective of social exchange theory (Lantz, 1978). In social exchange theory, it is believed that couples and families do best when relationship members do well in meeting each other's needs in a fair, equitable, and balanced fashion. In this view, problems emerge when one or two family members "get more" than other family members, when one or more family members "give more" than other family members, or when one or two family members receive less than the other family members. In social exchange theory, it is believed that problem manifestation occurs when the family giving system is out of balance or in disequilibrium, and it is considered the therapist's responsibility to monitor family giving to make certain that no one gives too little and/or gives too much, and that the system remains in equilibrium.

Existential family therapists hold a very different view. In most approaches to existential psychotherapy with couples and families the psychotherapist recommends and attempts to facilitate "unconditional giving" among all members of the marriage or family (Frankl, 1969; Lantz, 2000; Satir, 1967). In this existential view, it is believed that such self-transcendent giving expands the self, strengthens the self, rewards the self, and paradoxically encourages and facilitates other family members to give and grow in a similar fashion (Frankl, 1969; Satir, 1967). In systems theory terminology such unconditional giving triggers social exchange disequilibrium, which results in an unconditional giving runaway (Lantz, 2000; Satir, 1967). This view has been most elegantly written about by Viktor Frankl (1969) who has pioneered the use of self-transcendent giving as an effective method to utilize during sex therapy.

### **THE FULLNESS OF TIME**

In most essence oriented approaches to family psychotherapy the present moment of time is considered to be the most important dimension of time. In this view a focus upon the future often results in anxiety (i.e., the Oh, what if? syndrome). A focus upon the past results in depression (i.e., hyper-reflection on the loss and traumas in the past) and only a focus upon the "here and now" results in healthy and effective change (Grove & Haley, 1991). Existential psychotherapists hold a very different point of view (Frankl, 1969; Lantz, 2000; Mullan & Sangliuanno, 1964).

In existential family therapy's most psychotherapists follow Martin Heidegger (1962) and Viktor Frankl's (1969) ideas about the "full-

ness of time.” In both Frankl’s (1969) treatment philosophy of “Existenzanalyse” and in Heidegger’s (1962) philosophy of “Daseinsanalyse” there are three important elements of time. For both the future includes the meaning potentials and opportunities to be found in life. The present is the minute of time in which individuals and families “actualize” or make use of the meaning potentials in life and the past is where actualized meaning potentials are deposited and placed for eternity. In Frankl’s (1969) Existenzanalyse view there are three important family treatment dynamics: 1) “Noticing” meaning potentials in the future, 2) “Actualizing” and currently making use of such meaning potentials, and 3) “Honoring” meanings which have previously been actualized and deposited into the past (Frankl, 1969; Lantz, 1993, 2000). Figure 2 illustrates the fullness of time and the three family treatment dynamics connected to the fullness of time.

### AUTHENTIC LIVING

In most essence oriented approaches to family psychotherapy a primary treatment goal is to facilitate effective social living (Grove & Haley, 1991). In such approaches, the therapist attempts to facilitate good problem solving and communication patterns that occur between couples and family members and to help couples and families work through and/or overcome symptoms and problems (Haley, 1976). In essence oriented approaches to marital and family treatment symptoms and problems are considered to be signals that indicate dysfunction in the couple or family’s patterns of communication and also indicate that there is disruption in effective social living (Haley, 1976).

In existential family therapy the therapist is more committed to helping couples experience authentic living rather than simply effective

<i>Element of Time</i>	<i>Treatment Dynamic</i>
The Future	Noticing
The Present	Actualizing
The Past	Honoring

**FIGURE 2**

*The Fullness of Time*

social living (Kaye, 1986; Lantz, 2000; Whitaker, 1989). In this existential view symptoms and problems are often marital and/or family attempts at growth and/or efforts by family members to actualize meaning potentials (Lantz, 1993; Whitaker, 1989). As many existential philosophers and psychotherapists have pointed out, authentic living is often not a smooth, effective, and problem free style of life (Frankl, 1969; Heidegger, 1962; Lantz, 2000; Whitaker, 1989). Many existential family therapists believe that rapid resolution of problems and difficulties may well “cheat” the client couple and/or client family out of many opportunities for meaningful growth. In existential family therapy, every problem and symptom should be explored rather than rapidly resolved so that authentic social living can replace the effective social living patterns, which at times do limit growth (Andrews, 1974; Frankl, 1969; Lantz, 2000; Whitaker, 1989).

### **THE ELEMENT OF SURPRISE**

In essence oriented family treatment, it is considered possible to utilize good technology to predict and facilitate family and marital change (Haley, 1976). Such predictability depends on the discovery of the “rules of essence” (Wahl, 1949) and the discovery of treatment methods, which limit the family’s ability and freedom to resist such change (Grove & Haley, 1991, 1995; Haley, 1976).

In existential family therapy, the therapist is happy when couples and families are able to change, but is most happy when the kind of change or type of change “surprises” the psychotherapist (Lantz, 2000; Mullan & Sangliuanno, 1964; Whitaker, 1989). Such “surprise” is an indication that the couple or family is utilizing their freedom, proactivity, and internal locus of control to take over their life, the changes in their life and their ability to flexibly change long after the therapist and the family have parted ways (Whitaker, 1989). It is a strange and wonderful paradox that families who resist the therapist direction can often be the families that change the most (Lantz, 2000; Whitaker, 1989). In existential family therapy, it is believed that to honor rather than defeat client resistance helps the couple or family find their freedom, exercise their freedom, and discover their own path and their own way toward growth (Whitaker, 1989). In existential family therapy, the therapist is not a director, but rather a guide (Whitaker, 1989). Directors direct and guides are open to mystery and surprise (Lantz, 2000).

## **FREEDOM**

A central characteristic in existential family therapy is the therapist's insistence that families and couples are free to change, free to adapt, free to grow, and also free to defeat the therapist's best efforts to help them change and grow (Andrews, 1974; Bergantino, 1997; Lantz, 1993; Whitaker, 1989). The concept of freedom is a central theme in existential philosophy (Frankl, 1969; Heidegger, 1962; Sartre, 1956; Wahl, 1949) and existential family therapists have utilized this theme in their efforts to facilitate family spontaneity, flexibility, adaptability, responsibility, courage, and the awareness of the possibilities and meaning potentials in family life (Frankl, 1969; Lantz, 2000; Whitaker, 1989).

In existential family therapy, the term freedom does not indicate an absence of limitations upon family life (Andrews, 1974; Lantz, 2000; Whitaker, 1989). Existential family therapists do believe that there are internal and external limitations that constrict some response-abilities, but that family members always have some choice about how to respond to the limitations in life (Frankl, 1969; Whitaker, 1989). Existential philosophers such Heidegger (1962), Sartre (1956) and Wahl (1949) point out that freedom "depends" upon the limitations of life! For Heidegger, Sartre, and Wahl without limitations the human being is not capable of choice in life and that the presence of limitations is the core ingredient of freedom and responsibility. In existential family therapy, the psychotherapist utilizes the opportunity for choice to exercise the family's freedom, responsibility, strength, and internal locus of control (Andrews, 1974; Frankl, 1969; Whitaker, 1989).

## **MYSTERY**

In existential philosophy, essence is best studied and understood by utilizing logic and the scientific method (Marcel, 1956; Wahl, 1949), while existence is considered too complex, rich and complicated to be adequately understood by scientific measurement and the logical methods of science (Marcel, 1956). For many existential philosophers (Marcel, 1956; Wahl, 1949) and existential family therapists (Lantz, 2000; Laing, 1961; Whitaker, 1989), essence is studied through logic but existence is discussed, studied, and understood through participation with and reflection upon mystery. Although existential family therapists believe that matters of essence such as pattern, problem, factors of influence, causation, and pattern sequence are scientific issues, they

also believe that matters of existence such as love, friendship, courage, loyalty, fidelity, hope, freedom, and determination are mysteries, which can only be understood through encounter, participation, reflection, meditation, and intuitive study (Lantz, 1978; Satir, 1967; Whitaker, 1989; Yalom, 1980).

### **DESCRIPTIVE RESEARCH**

In existential family therapy, the process of research is somewhat different from essence oriented approaches to family treatment (Lantz, 2000). In essence oriented, problem centered, and procedurally based approaches to family service experimental and quasi-experimental research design, control groups, experimental groups, chance sampling, dependent and independent variables are used to help the scientist discover what works best with which kind of client family in what kind of clinical situation or clinical setting (Jayaratne & Levy, 1979).

Existential family therapists have a very different research view. Some existential family therapists believe deeply in family freedom, consciousness, awareness, family intentionality, family response-ability, the proactive ability of families, and the reality of mysterious change (Curry, 1967; Lantz, 2000; Whitaker, 1989). The ideas of reliability and validity, and especially external validity, seem very far-fetched (Lantz, 2000). In existential family therapy, descriptive, phenomenological, and qualitative research methods are viewed as reasonable approaches to utilize in order to describe family change, to discover what interventions “might” be helpful to a couple or family, to describe clinical work that might be useful to other family therapists in their work with their own unique client couples and families, and to identify natural healing processes, which couples and families rather consistently discover in their efforts to change and grow (Curry, 1967; Lantz, 2000; Whitaker, 1989). In existential family therapy descriptive research is valued above experiential research because the ideas of experimental “control” is foreign and even “toxic” to the existential concept of freedom (Curry, 1967; Kaye, 1986; Lantz, 2000; Marcel, 1956; Sartre, 1956; Wahl, 1949; Whitaker, 1989).

### **THE THERAPIST AS AN ARTIST**

In essence oriented approaches to family psychotherapy, it is generally believed that science can be utilized to understand and discover

intervention methods that work on couples and families to make them change, teach them to solve problems and to even defeat their own best efforts to resist change (Brock & Barnard, 1992; Grove & Haley, 1991; Haley, 1976; Jayaratne & Levy, 1979). In this view, the therapist believes that his or her ability as a scientist is the best gift the therapist can give the client family, and the therapist utilizes the results, methods, and procedures of science to create a helping identity and a helping treatment atmosphere.

In existential family therapy, the psychotherapist believes that the process of treatment is an artistic process rather than a process of science (Curry, 1967; Lantz, 2000; Whitaker, 1989). In this artistic view, the family therapist realizes that the current clinical situation has never-ever previously occurred, will never exactly occur again in the future, and that no valid, reliable, and scientific procedure and understanding that can be accurately and predictably utilized to create change (Lantz, 2000). As a result, the family therapist must use art to jointly create with the client couple or family a path toward growth that is unique to the client couple or family, to the current clinical context, and to the therapist's abilities and limitations (Lantz, 2000; Whitaker, 1989). This author first learned about the value of "healing art" as he watched creative combat surgeons during the Vietnam War successfully save lives time and time again by artistically creating a new surgical technique to use with a soldier's traumatic combat wound that had never previously been seen and/or described in any surgical text. Such artistic healing during family psychotherapy has also consistently been manifested and demonstrated by existential family therapists such as Andrews (1974), Bergantino (1997), Boerop (1975), Curry (1967), Frankl (1969), Kaye (1986), Laing (1961), Mullan and Sangliu-anno (1964), Satir (1967), Whitaker (1989), and it is hoped Lantz (1978, 1993, 2000).

### **WARNING**

In the previous sections of this article, the author has utilized a dichotomy to compare and contrast essence oriented and existential oriented family therapy approaches. Although I believe that this presentation form is useful (or I would not have used it), I realize it is not completely accurate or completely true. For example, it is true that in the real world of family treatment, essence oriented family therapists such as Haley (1976) and Grove (Grove & Haley, 1991) sometimes

work in mysterious ways, sometimes utilize qualitative and descriptive research methods, sometimes stress client freedom, and sometime utilize many other existential concepts in their work. It is also true that many existential family therapists such as Andrews (1974), Bergantino (1997), Satir (1967), and Wright (1985) are sometimes systematic and procedurally oriented in their work and are certainly not above utilizing science to inform their work. In the real world, most family therapists are essence oriented therapists who are willing to be both touched and informed by client freedom, subjectivity, mystery, and surprise in spite of their commitment to science, predictability, and a problem centered approach. On the other hand, there still remain a good number of family therapists that are primarily focused upon freedom, meaning, mystery, knowledge richness, and empathic availability, but who are willing to be touched and informed by the rules of essence and scientific knowledge about family problems, transactional patterns, and empirically based treatment procedures as long as such information does not blunt encounter or the client's awareness of freedom (Lantz, 1978, 2000).

## CONCLUSIONS

In this article the author has compared and contrasted the family therapy world views of essence oriented family treatment and existential family treatment. It is the author's hope that this comparison will provide additional awareness about the practice of existential family therapy, its difficulties, and its potentials to provide couples and families with many diverse and rich ways to change.

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