

EXISTENTIAL THEORY OF SOCIAL WORK

VLADIMÍRA MINAŘÍKOVÁ - TOMÁŠ PLANKA - MONIKA MAČKINOVÁ

Abstract

Philosophy, unlike religion, wants to understand the world rationally. Philosophical history is replete with questions, such as how man can know his being and his existence. Existence and stay which are explained in terms of immediate experience and understanding of oneself. Existentialism has theoretical links from humanistic theory. This is based on the assumption that man is a rational and free being. Man is capable of rational cooperation, and that he is able to participate in the creation of his own. It arose in response to Hegelian rationalism, to the experiences of soldiers after World War I, and to the political situation. It became widespread after the Second World War. It was necessary to respond to the existential needs of the people. The characteristics of existentialism include freedom, responsibility and truthfulness. The division of existentialism into French and German according to language or into theistic and atheistic. Major exponents include Blaise Pascal, Martin Heidegger, Gabriel Marcel. It is characterized by an exceptional focus on man's individualism and human experience. For this philosophy, the fundamental concepts include freedom, human responsibility, suffering, the search for identity, the meaning of life, and balancing the contradictions of value.

Key words

Existentialism. Social work. Communication. Social policy.

Existential Theory of Social Work

Existential social work theory is a humanistic and philosophical approach that emphasizes the importance of subjective experience, freedom, responsibility, and authenticity in the helping profession. Rooted in existentialist philosophy, this theory provides social workers with a framework for understanding and addressing the unique challenges and complexities of human existence. It explores key principles, concepts, and applies existential theories to practice.

Social work wants to highlight its importance and potential for improving the quality of care provided to individuals and communities. The emphasis is on exploring human freedom, which is desirable. Freedom, however, can be very difficult for some clients, unable to be responsible

for their lives unable to accept consequences for their actions. It emphasizes human freedom and the choices that individuals make. This direction is based on understanding and empathy, there is supposed to be a certain affection between the social worker and the client. Relationships with other people are essential to self-understanding. The uniqueness of the client and the autonomy of their decision making.

The client is regarded as a key person. The social worker tries to motivate and keep the client in the initiated efforts for change (Neszméry 2019). The worker supports the client in self-reflection, helps to uncover the problem, fosters understanding and promotes the ability to make free decisions. The social worker's flexibility and ability to adapt to the client's needs. The social worker sees the client through the client's eyes and tries to achieve small goals at first, progressing to larger ones or breaking them down into short, medium and long term goals. The goal must be well defined and the level of support the client needs. The goal should promote the client's self-sufficiency and responsibility and aim for self-sufficiency. The goal should be specific, realistic, achievable and evaluable. If the goal is unrealistic, the client needs to work with the client on the goal specification and modify it.

"Existentialism touching the structures of life, it is an artistic and philosophical movement that examines the existence of man in terms of his individuality in terms of social relations. According to the representatives of existentialism, the life of man depends on his person, they emphasize personal freedom of life and choice. Existentialists comment on the fundamental questions of human existence, but do not lose the aesthetic function of the work of art." (Laca, 2020)

In social work, this principle emphasises the importance of respecting the autonomy and self-determination of clients (Neszméry 2020). The social worker should support the client in making informed decisions while acknowledging their responsibility for those decisions. Unconditional positive acceptance allows the worker to accept the client as they are, including their current feelings, without the need to change them. In doing so, the social worker shows respect for the client and supports their individuality.

Furthermore, he or she actively and sensitively listens to the client, orientates himself or herself to the client's emotions and refrains from his or her own evaluation - he or she does not judge the client, does not work with the client as a diagnosis but as a person, makes recommendations, avoids instructions and commands. The social worker creates socially favourable conditions that are important for the development of the client's inner abilities and expertise. Existential theory deals with the person as an autonomous being, focusing on the inner world of the client.

The first task of existential social work is to find out what role the client plays in his/her social problem and to communicate this information to the client. The social worker has more of a consultant role. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing and valuing the subjective experiences of individuals. Recognises that each person's reality is unique and shaped by their thoughts, emotions and perceptions. Within this framework, social workers are encouraged to actively listen and empathise with their clients and help them to explore and make sense of their lived experiences.

They analyse the client's current situation and behaviour in the here and now. They teach their clients to accept their limits and work with them and their potential. It is guided by several basic principles that shape the practice and approach of social workers. Emphasis is placed on the uniqueness and individuality of the client and the social worker respects and accepts the client's past and focuses on the client's available capacities. It focuses on the present, problem solving and seeks to look to the future.

Authenticity is a central concept in existential theory. It refers to the idea that individuals should live in accordance with their true self and values. Social workers using this approach help clients discover and embrace their authentic self, enabling them to live a more fulfilled and meaningful life.

According to Mátel (2019), the existential approach, a person-centered philosophy, is inspired by the psychology and work of Carl Ransom Rogers (January 8, 1902- February 4, 1987), an American psychologist and psychotherapist. He is one of the most prominent representatives, of the stream of humanistic psychology. Rogers influenced social work indirectly, especially in counseling. His findings include observations about the nature of the conditions and situations necessary for successful work with clients. His approach assumes that individuals possess within themselves the potential for self-understanding and transformation of their own self-concept and attitudes. In doing so, these potentials can be harnessed in an atmosphere of supportive psychological relationships.

According to Rogers, 'All people have a tendency towards self-actualization. The essence of this tendency is the desire to preserve and develop one's own existence. It takes place by fulfilling various actual needs (physiological needs for security, safety, recognition, etc.) and is the essence of human motivation. Rogers distinguished between the self and the organism. While he understands the organism as the psychophysical basis of all experience, as the space that contains the subjective reality and self-actualizing tendencies of the person, the SELF takes

a stance toward experience and subjective reality, approaching the reality of the experienced with evaluation" (Matoušek, 2021).

It was the first to use the term client instead of patient. Its psychotherapeutic approach - in translation - for a time renamed its approach the client-centered approach. Later, he realized that the philosophies of his approach could be applied to other areas of human relationships and in this context came up with the name person-centered approach.

"The Rogerian approach is classified as a strand of humanistic psychology and psychotherapy. This type of therapy counts mainly on actualization, or the innate and spontaneous tendency of the organism to develop its positive possibilities and, in the case of the human being, to achieve a higher quality of personality and life, including health. The therapy consists in the therapist achieving the desired changes in the patient's personality and expression by accepting him or her without reservation and in a highly empathic and authentic way. The aforementioned relational offer creates a psychotherapeutic space that fosters personal growth, releases self-sanitizing mechanisms and allows the patient's incongruences (internal contradictions) to be overcome" (Vymětal, 2007).

Characteristics of Rogers psychotherapy

"Author Carl R. Rogers is one of the most important humanistic authors to have influenced social work theory. His influence can be seen in contemporary social work in the work of counseling and therapy. Among his significant findings are his observations about the nature of the conditions that condition the success of a social worker's work with a client. Rogers' approach was based on psychodynamic theory in which he developed a humanistic perspective focusing on the so-called „I" seeking personal character. The central concept of „I" as an awareness of the perception of self". (Laca, 2021)

Is a psychotherapeutic approach translated as person-centered approach. It is a non-directive approach, the emphasis is on the relationship and presence between the client and the therapist or social worker. It belongs to the stream of humanistic psychotherapy. It is originally known as non-directive therapy.

The basic hypothesis of his approach assumes that individuals have within themselves the means to understand and transform their own self-concept and attitudes, and that these possibilities can be exploited in an atmosphere of supportive psychological relationships. Creating such an atmosphere is within the competence of the worker who meets the basic conditions of the therapeutic relationship. These conditions are unconditional positive

acceptance, empathic understanding and congruence. The basic relational offer (acceptance, empathy and authenticity) leads to changes in the client's personality and behaviour, and to a reduction in difficulties. The effectiveness of psychotherapy lies in the client's ability to actively cooperate and communicate. It is further enhanced by the client's tendency towards greater autonomy and self-determination. The aim is to create an atmosphere in which the client feels safe and accepted as an individual personality. The therapist encourages the client to be more spontaneous, to be more in touch with their feelings and form closer relation with people.

According to the existential approach, the social worker should radiate feeling, genuineness and positive respect. By these conditions we mean unconditional positive acceptance, empathic understanding and congruence of the person-centred approach", originally directive approach. "The Rogers approach is classified as a strand of humanistic psychology and psychotherapy. This type of therapy counts mainly on actualization, or the innate and spontaneous tendency of the organism to develop its positive possibilities and, in the case of the human being, to achieve a higher quality of personality and life, including health. The therapy consists in the therapist achieving the desired changes in the personality and expression of the patient by accepting him without reservation, by expressing himself towards him in a highly empathic and authentic way." (Vymětal, 2027)

Rogers' work with the client is humanistic in its focus on the client as an individual, with an emphasis on the client's worth and the purposefulness and rationality of the essence of the human being. The existential characteristic is working with the client and their inner activity and is relationship based. According to Rogers, the client is free and therefore responsible for his or her actions and actions. His conception of client work is humanistic in its focus on the client as an individual, its emphasis on the client's worth, and its attribution of purpose and rationality to the nature of the human being.

Existential elements are prominent in the emphasis on the individual's creativity, which is limited by social norms, and in the perception of the free person. An existential characteristic is the concept of working with the client, which takes the client's inner activity as the solution to the problem and emphasizes the element of relationship. According to Rogers, man has a tendency towards personal growth and constant development. Existential elements are evident in the subjectivity, the creativity of the individual, which is limited by social norms. The perception of man as a free being.

Communication and non-directive approach

„All communication consists of sending a message that stimulates a response. Both messages and reactions have a content and a relationship component. The content of a message is expressible as a record of the words that have been spoken; the relational component of communication is an attempt to define an attitude between the communicators. Reactions can be accepting, rejecting or selective. The distinction between the content and relational components of communication is close to the distinction between verbal and nonverbal communication. Non-verbal expressions include facial expressions, gestures, force, tone, colouring of voice, attitudes and the whole context of the situation. Nonverbal communication determines how the verbal message is to be understood" (Matoušek, 2022).

Authenticity is necessary in action and communication, congruence is manifested in the therapeutic relationship with the client by the therapist being himself or herself, that is, authentic, also receptive and open to self and constructively also to the other. The social worker does not hide behind the mask of an expert and does not decide on the content of the therapy - this is determined by the client himself. The important thing is to receive the information, to evaluate it in the second and to send the right feedback. To evaluate and process the information received from the client correctly. The worker may consider some information less important than for the client and this may be the opposite - selective perception. The social worker encourages the client to be more spontaneous, to be more in touch with their feelings and to form closer relationships with people. It also encourages a mutually cooperative process. The social worker promotes the client's strengths rather than analyzing negative aspects and characteristics.

The non-directive approach is characterized by acceptance, that is, unconditional positive acceptance, supporting the client as an individual, expressing respect and empathic understanding. It takes the client as he is without the need to change him. It is important to listen to the client in an empathic, active and sensitive way, not judging the client as a diagnosis but as a person. Encourage the client to be more spontaneous, to be more in touch with their feelings and to form closer relationships with people.

Effectiveness lies in the client's ability to actively collaborate and communicate. The social worker creates favourable conditions, especially unconditional acceptance, which develops the client's inner abilities, who is then able to solve his/her social situation alone or with minimal help. The social worker must not impose his/her opinion on the client, must respect the client's point of view, but should discuss with him/her, show him/her all alternatives, all possible

solutions. However, they must not forget to list all the pros and cons, respect the cultural background of the client, and explain their recommendations in detail.

The worker is a kind of guide who helps the client to find his way, to find himself, to find his self-determination, to awaken in him the decision to change his situation and to actually solve it. Genuineness (congruence) is manifested in the therapeutic relationship with the client by the worker being himself, i.e. authentic, also receptive and open to himself and constructively also to the other. The social worker does not hide behind professionalism, he does not decide the content of the conversation and the client determines this. In looking to the future, the connection with the past and the present is important.

A non-directive approach is appropriate for chronic problems, long-term issues where there is no danger of delay. Allow the client enough time and space. If we have enough time and patience with the client we want to achieve lasting change. We need to be aware that it is difficult to change the approach to the client from directive to non-directive. If we have been guiding the client, giving them instructions, in some cases it can be difficult to start working with them non-directively. The client has become accustomed to seeing the social worker as an authority figure who guides them. Therefore, when it is not possible to use the non-directive way, it is better to try to combine the directive way with the non-directive way as far as possible.

"To sum up, the therapist communicates with the patient in a genuine and interested way and strives for moments of authentic encounter. The therapist should be unselfish in doing so - that is, interested in the patient's growth and not in his or her own needs. The therapist's care should be contingent and independent of the patient's reciprocal care. The therapist should be able to be both with himself and with the patient and should be able to enter the patient's world with interest and experience it as the patient experiences it. This requires the therapist to approach the patient without prejudice, to focus on sharing the patient's experiences without hastily judging or labeling the patient" (Yalom, 2020).

Principles of non-directive communication

Communication is the mediation, expression, disclosure, and reception of information. It is the basis of mutual understanding and influence. It is a process of constant interaction between people. Communication is the basic form of social interaction between people. Most often through the spoken or written word, but also through symbols, gestures,.... The content of the message should have a motivational meaning. The mission of communication in terms of social interaction between people is to convey what the worker intends, in a way that the listener understands.

Communication is an activity that influences other activities. It usually involves checking back to see if the effect of the message is consistent with the speaker's intentions. Communication takes place with each other through words, gestures and facial expressions. It is not only speaking well but also the art of listening to the other. The ability to listen to another is a sign of maturity. In the process of communication, there is not only a formal transmission of messages, but also the formation of an image of the communicators based on impressions of appearance and behavior. There is mutual influence and feedback based on the reactions of the communicator. Both are in a certain situation, with certain intentions, and react to each other. The client needs to be treated in a partnership manner as a specialist in their own life. One of the goals is to find and mobilize one's own resources and their capacity for problem solving.

The client is seen as part of the system. Empathy, helpfulness, acceptance and openness of the social worker are required. Listening refraining from making one's own comments during the interview. After a time, briefly reiterate what the client said that we understood what the client wanted to tell us. A non-directive approach is one that only encourages the client to come to a solution on their own. The client has to see their problem realistically, name them, talk about them and find ways to solve them.

"Many people have problems with communication. They may, for example, receive information incorrectly, or what they choose from the information they receive is difficult for other communicators to understand. Communication blocks often arise in feedback that may be misinterpreted in relation to the other party's intention. Most relationships contain elements of both symmetrical and complementary communication, but usually lean toward one or the other. Successful relationships use both communication positions. This also applies to the social worker-client relationship. The social worker should never have permanent dominance" (Matoušek, 2022).

Existential approach

The existential approach is primarily oriented towards individual work with the client. Social work with the individual is characterised by a relationship between social worker and client that is based on communication. The focus is on each individual and recognizes them as an individual. The social worker respects the client's view of his/her situation. The social worker offers solutions and the client chooses among them. The client's problems are addressed together in a comprehensive manner.

In individual social work with one client, we may include a couple or family. Understanding the client is essential, but also getting to know the family, the community, the culture, and knowing the social and health services that offer help to improve the social situation. Increase the client's tendency for greater autonomy and self-determination. The social worker supports the client in positive thinking and attitude. The focus is on the client's strengths and positive aspects, and the client's weaknesses and negative aspects are pushed aside and not pointed out.

Social work with groups works with the group as a resource that can address difficulties in the social functioning of individuals. The approach is particularly effective for clients with unbalanced or low self-esteem and distorted self-perception and self-concept.

Existential social work is used with unemployed clients, the elderly, the homeless, people with disabilities, people with addictions, families, couples, people with mental illness, ethnic groups, and people providing paid sexual services. Not appropriate for clients in acute crisis, with verbal communication disorders, severe intellectual disabilities. For those who require only occasional cooperation and informal work. Limited in working with involuntary clients. Social workers can assist clients in exploring their existential fears and in finding meaning and purpose in their lives, even in the face of adversity. Existential anxiety, the confrontation with the inherent meaninglessness and uncertainty of life, is a fundamental aspect of existential theory.

Using Existential Theory in Social Work

The approach is particularly effective for clients with unbalanced or low self-esteem, distorted self-perception and self-concept. Existential theory in social work offers practical applications in a variety of settings, including individual counselling, group therapy, community interventions and social policy development. Social work is oriented towards individual client work, but assumes that the social worker understands the clients' problem in a political social context, but does not seek political change

Individual counselling social workers can help clients explore their existential concerns, clarify their values and set meaningful goals. They can assist in developing strategies for coping with anxiety and uncertainty. Group therapy sessions can create opportunities for individuals to share their existential concerns and learn from the experiences of others. These groups can foster a sense of community and shared humanity.

Community intervention social workers can apply existential theory to address systemic issues that affect communities. This approach encourages social workers to engage in critical discussions about broader social structures that affect the existential well-being of individuals.

Social Policy and Existential Theory

Existentialism directs social workers to advocate for policies that respect individual autonomy, human dignity and freedom of choice. This includes advocating for better mental health services and supportive environments that help individuals manage life's challenges. Existential social work theory offers a valuable perspective.

Some critics argue that the emphasis on individualism may overlook the role of social, economic, and political factors that contribute to individuals' problems. The role of the social worker is to assist clients in reflecting on themselves, in discovering the meaning that a problematic situation may have for them. Moreover, existential theory may not resonate with all clients, and social workers must tailor their approach to the unique needs of each individual. The purpose of social work is to empower people to take responsibility for their lives and their management of them.

The role of the social worker in existential social work is to assist clients in reflecting on themselves, uncovering problematic situations and understanding how experiences affect them. The social worker should be able to help the client find their goals and understand their goals for the future. Existentialism emphasizes the exploration of human freedom. It focuses on human existence, which it explains in terms of immediate experience and understanding of the self.

Conclusion

Existential social work theory provides a philosophical basis for understanding and addressing the complexities of human existence in the context of social work practice. It emphasises the importance of subjectivity, freedom, responsibility and authenticity and offers a humanistic approach to helping individuals and communities make sense of life situations and problems. It enriches the field of social work by promoting a deeper understanding of the human experience and offering a framework for empowering individuals to lead more authentic and meaningful lives.

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Kontakt

Ing. **VLADIMÍRA MINAŘÍKOVÁ**, Department of Social Work, Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava. minarikova100@uniba.sk

Mgr. **TOMÁŠ PLANKA**, Department of Social Work, Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava. planka3@uniba.sk

Dr.h.c. prof. PhDr. **MONIKA MAČKINOVÁ**, PhD., Department of Social Work, Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava. mackinova@fedu.uniba.sk