



Existential Coaching Psychology

Developing a Model for Effective Practise

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Abstract

In this article I seek to elaborate a model of existential coaching psychology that is both grounded in existential phenomenological philosophy but also informed by work in coaching. To date, many attempts to develop an existential approach to coaching have – in my view – described an approach to coaching that is either indistinguishable from existential counselling and psychotherapy or a rather crude form of technical eclecticism. In this article, I discuss the key elements of existential coaching, as I understand it, and the need to modify the existential therapeutic approach for coaching practise. To this end, I draw on extant work on coaching and, in particular, the need for both a goal and solution directed approach if an existential model of psychological coaching is going to provide the basis for effective practise.

Keywords: *Existential coaching psychology, existential phenomenological philosophy, existential counselling*

Introduction

Whilst psychological coaching has become a recognised and important mode of intervention that is increasingly practised, discussed and researched within psychology (Cox, Bachkirova & Clutterbuck, 2010; Palmer & Whybrow, 2008; Stober & Grant, 2006), there have been relatively few attempts to elaborate an existential approach to coaching. In this article I aim to outline my own attempt to provide a coherent coaching framework that is informed by the existential and phenomenological traditions. This comes about through my long-standing work as an existential psychotherapist and experience in coaching practise, along-

side my membership within the broader coaching community. Key to the presentation here is the formulation of an existential method of coaching that brings together the core of existential therapeutic practise with ideas from solution focussed therapy, to produce a mode of practise that is applicable to the needs of clients presenting for coaching.

In the following section I outline the fundamentals of existential counselling and psychotherapy, due to the fact that existential coaching will need to be informed by similar ideas. This will necessarily be brief but should provide enough detail for the reader to appreciate the key aspects of this approach. I then move on to discuss existential

coaching and how this needs to draw upon ideas from existential counselling and psychotherapy alongside ideas from existing coaching practice. I argue that it is not good enough to simply take ideas from existential counselling and psychotherapy and then call this existential coaching when applied within a different context. I argue that it is crucial for an existential model of coaching to be designed specifically for coaching practise, recognising the different client needs and work within the broader coaching community. Finally, I present the application of this particular model of existential coaching within the context of my own work with a client struggling with his work-life balance.

Existential Counselling and Psychotherapy

The existential tradition of therapy began with the work of Medard Boss and Ludwig Binswanger working and writing in the early 1900s (Cooper, 2003). They had become increasingly dissatisfied with the psychoanalytic approach to therapy that they had trained in and sought instead to develop a mode of practise that drew directly on the work of existential philosophy. Key to this was the use of the phenomenological method, which is also the central means of investigation in existential philosophy itself, as the primary method for the psychotherapist in seeking to understand the world as it appears to the client, rather than through any external theoretical lens. This stands in contrast to the psychoanalytic perspective, where practitioners seek to understand the client through the lens of psychoanalytic theory. However, whilst the phenomenological method is the heart of existential therapy it is not the whole of this approach. In addition to maintaining a phenomenological stance towards a client an existential therapist will also draw on ideas from existential philosophy itself. Below, I briefly introduce the phenomenological method and then highlight some key existential themes that are central to most existential therapeutic practise and that are also applicable to coaching.

Phenomenology is a philosophical tradition based on the work on Edmund Husserl writing in the early 1900s in which a practical method was developed to enable the philosopher, or indeed now psychotherapist, to 'return to the things in their appearing'. That is, through the rigorous application of epoché and psychological phenomenological reduction an existential therapist seeks to set aside

the 'natural attitude' (one's everyday way of thinking about the world) to more closely approach the world as it appears to one's client. This involves the therapist engage in acknowledging and then holding their preconceptions to one side whilst seeking to stay with description of the lifeworld (the world as it is lived) of their client. Hierarchies of meaning are avoided, at least at first, and all aspects of a client's lifeworld are continually verified against their experience. The aim is to approach the phenomenon being investigated as if for the first time with a naïve sense of wonder. Previous experience is set aside in order to ascertain the 'essence' of the phenomenon, a pure description of the invariant properties that are perceived. Both client and therapist thus work together to stay with concrete details of experience, avoid abstract theorising, and through this gain a rich, thick description of the world as it is lived by the client. For further detail of the phenomenological method and existential therapy see Langdrige (2007, 2012).

The roots of existentialism can be traced to the work of Kierkegaard, with earlier thinkers such as Heraclitus and Pascal generally thought of as 'proto-existentialists'. It is with Heidegger that we see existentialism developed most fully, even though he himself refused the label of 'existentialist', with his writing directly influencing the hugely important work of Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and De Beauvoir (see Langdrige, 2012, for more on this body of work). The writings of these thinkers, and many others, constitutes a rich body of practical philosophy, which there is not the space to cover in detail here, that existential therapists draw on when working with their clients to inform their understanding of the client's presenting concerns and their own interventions. Some of the key concerns of existential counsellors and psychotherapists include:

- A focus on the concrete, unique and verb-like nature of existence
- Recognition of the place of anxiety as an essential aspect of existence
- Acknowledgement of the finite nature of life and the way in which we are all aware of our own mortality
- An understanding of the freedom to make choices
- Recognition of the limits (facticity) to existence but our capacity to determine its meaning ourselves

- The fundamentally relational nature of life
- Recognition of the way that lived experience is always embodied

Key to the existential approach is an understanding of the way in which people are free to choose what to make of their existence. That is, whilst their choices are bounded by the limits of their being-in-the-world, they are not determined (by biology or early childhood experiences) but freely chosen. People therefore have the capacity to make their lives meaningful and through this constitute their identities. The world in these terms is not inherently meaningful but subject to the meaning-making activities of those engaged with it. Action is fuelled by the anxiety that comes from recognition of our being-towards-death, our finite existence, and our capacity to utilise this to find authentic ways of living. This is always within the context of a shared social world in which we always act in relation with those around us. These ideas provide a framework for understanding the ways that people act in the world and useful heuristics for the existential therapist, when working phenomenologically, to facilitate their formulation of the client's presenting concerns and subsequent therapeutic interventions (see Langdridge, 2012, for more detail).

Existential coaching

Whilst existential coaching is undoubtedly a new idea, there have been some interesting attempts to elaborate an existential method of psychological coaching (see, for example, Spinelli, 2010; van Deurzen & Hanaway, 2012). Whilst these attempts provide a welcome alternative to more commonplace models of coaching that are grounded in ideas from Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) or other psychotherapeutic perspectives, I have become increasingly concerned that these developments have a tendency to fall into one of two camps. The first camp appears to offer little that is new or distinct from existing models of existential counselling and psychotherapy (e.g. Spinelli & Horner, 2008; Spinelli, 2010; van Deurzen 2012). These moves to develop an existential framework for coaching practise do not directly engage with extant coaching research or practise. That is, these attempts fail to provide a model of coaching practise that reflects the very different mode of client engagement and specified outcomes entailed in coaching. In my view, coaching requires a distinct

mode of practise and, whilst it may build on existing psychotherapeutic theory and knowledge, should not simply involve the importation or translation of ideas from counselling and psychotherapy to a setting with 'higher functioning' clients. Coaching, if it is to have any value, must be a distinct form of practise to psychotherapy and therefore develop modes of practise that reflect the key distinctions between coaching and psychotherapy. Coaching psychology has been usefully defined thus (Grant & Palmer, 2002 cited in Palmer & Whybrow, 2008: 2):

Coaching psychology is for enhancing performance in work and personal life domains with normal, non-clinical populations, underpinned by models of coaching grounded in established therapeutic approaches.

Putting aside concerns that many existential therapists, amongst others, might have about the unproblematic use of the word 'normal', this definition does distinguish coaching psychology very clearly from psychotherapy through the twin focus on enhancing performance (in work and personal life) and non-clinical populations. The consequence of such a distinction is that whilst models of coaching are likely to be grounded in established therapeutic approaches they will need to be modified to adequately support the goal of 'enhancing performance' and meet the needs of non-clinical populations. These modifications should – in my view – be developed with appropriate consideration of the theoretical underpinnings of the approach being taken, with recognition of the epistemological stance that is core to the therapeutic perspective in question.

A second distinction between therapy and coaching concerns the demands placed upon the clients. Psychological coaching assumes that a client will have the capacity to engage actively in the work, be able to formulate and work towards goals (assisted by the coach of course), in a manner that would not be expected of the client in psychotherapy. Many clients seeking psychotherapy present with profound difficulties in effecting change in their lives and would find it very difficult, if not impossible, to articulate clear and achievable goals such that they could 'enhance their performance', whether this be in their work or personal lives. The different demands placed upon clients will also

necessarily influence the mode of engagement, and therefore the need for distinct models of practise.

The second camp of existential approaches to coaching does often engage with ideas commonly in use in coaching but simply brings together otherwise disparate and often theoretically incompatible ideas and practices, akin to a rather poor form of technically eclectic psychotherapy. What we see is people moving rather randomly between a phenomenological attitude and ideas from existentialism and CBT or Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), with little consideration of the epistemological tensions or practical implications for the client experience (see Reed, 2012; Mirea, 2012).

One notable exception is the work of LeBon and Arnaud (2012) who describe a method of practise for existential coaching that I think successfully combines key aspects of existential counselling and psychotherapy with an understanding of the specific needs of coaching work. They outline a five-step procedure, as follows (p. 49-50):

1. Understanding the situation and framing the decision-problem
2. Understanding what matters
3. Searching for options
4. Choosing the best option
5. Implementing the decision

Their focus is predominantly on decision-making and the steps therefore necessarily reflect this concern. They also draw on six specific existential concerns within this framework, including: emotions (e.g. existential anxiety), values and meaning, freedom and responsibility, uncertainty, sedimented beliefs, and time and mortality. These concerns represent much of the core of the existential therapeutic approach and this, combined with an understanding of relevant work in decision-making, lead to a theoretically sound and practically oriented approach to coaching that has considerable credibility. The only downside is the focus on decision-making, at the expense of other potential concerns within coaching, and the lack of a serious and considered phenomenological framework. The approach I have been developing and that is discussed below is potentially wider in scope and thus applicable to a greater array of presenting concerns. Regardless, the approach of LeBon and Arnaud is impressive and unusual within the extant literature for the concern with both integrat-

ing theory and practise in a coherent yet relevant way for coaching practise.

Developing a model of existential coaching

Here I briefly outline my own model of existential coaching, an approach that – I believe – is sensitive to the particular needs of coaching practice. This model is also one that, whilst drawing on practices beyond those commonly used in existential psychotherapy, is mindful of the need that these be theoretically compatible with the core of existential practice, particularly phenomenological theory and method. This is a new approach that I have developed that whilst anecdotally supported by my own experience would benefit from empirical investigation. There are three key aspects to this model:

- (1) Use of the phenomenological method
- (2) Application of existential theory (to inform practise)
- (3) A commitment to being goal and solution focussed

I have written previously, in the context of time-limited existential therapy, about the way in which it is possible to bring together existential therapy and solution-focussed therapy (Langdrige, 2006). I will not reiterate the arguments here but suffice it to say that I believe (and have argued previously) these two perspectives are theoretically compatible (particularly given the a-theoretical nature of solution-focussed therapy - SFT), with SFT offering a collection of practical tools that are particularly appropriate for coaching practise (O'Connell and Palmer, 2008). That is, the addition of SFT to the core of existential therapy allows for a more directive way of working concerned with goals and solutions, alongside an array of techniques that may act as an adjunct to the phenomenological method. I agree with LeBon and Arnaud (ibid: 48) that coaching is distinct from therapy being “generally shorter term, less aimed at helping with psychological problems and more at achieving an authentic and fulfilling life, action as well as insight-oriented and more goal directed and structured than free-floating. “This difference speaks to the value of bringing together practical ideas from solution-focussed therapy with ideas from existential therapy. Without this, we run the risk of simply offering existential ther-

apy to a different client group, something I think practically and also ethically dubious.

So, what does this form of coaching look like in practise? There are a number of key aspects:

- (1) The primary tool is the phenomenological method and a desire to understand the life-world of the client. That is, coaching will begin with a thorough examination of the reasons for the client seeking coaching with appropriate exploration of how this connects with other relevant aspects of their lifeworld. Given the constrained nature of the coaching contract, this needs to be a focussed exploration rather than the more free floating approach often seen with open-ended existential therapy. The aim within the first one or two sessions must be to engage in active exploration of the goal/s that the client presents but not remain exclusively focussed on such goals. Part of the benefit of the phenomenological exploration is the possibility of sharpening up the goal/s (or even formulating new ones) and also understanding how these might relate to other aspects of the clients lifeworld.
- (2) Goal/s must be clear and achievable and it is here that the existential coach will need to step outside the phenomenological attitude and instead draw on ideas from SFT to facilitate the production of clear, achievable and measurable goal/s.
- (3) Whilst engaged in the phenomenological attitude the coach needs to be alert to broader existential concerns that may allow or facilitate the successful achievement of the goal/s. The coach may begin to formulate their interventions in the light of this understanding, which will later be communicated directly to the client.
- (4) Phenomenological exploration will also allow the coach to become aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the client and how strengths in particular may be marshalled to achieve the stated goal/s.
- (5) Following an exploratory phenomenological phase the existential coach may then move quickly, if appropriate, to a conversational stance where they work with the client to identify existential blocks to achieving the goal/s.
- (6) Clients are encouraged to engage in change activity in pursuit of their goal/s (rather than extensive reflective activity).

- (7) Practical ways of achieving the goal/s are discussed with scaling techniques from SFT used to keep a clear and measurable focus on the achievement of the goal/s.

It is important to note that these are not stages to be worked through but rather elements within a matrix of coaching practise that need to be held in mind and then utilised creatively at the appropriate moment. Below, I provide a brief illustrative example of the use of the above model of existential coaching in practise, with a client seeking to achieve a better 'work-life' balance.

A case study: James and the need for a better 'work-life' balance

James came to see me to – in his words – find a way to achieve a better 'work-life' balance. He was a very successful city trader in the financial sector but felt that whilst his life 'seemed perfect' in many ways, he was 'drawn into' work much more than he wanted and neglected his relationship and social life. His goal was clear but not measurable or necessarily achievable so our initial work focussed on what he meant by 'getting a better work-life balance'. It became clear that this was focussed on him needing to find ways to be more boundaried with work and therefore able to use his income to engage in aspects of life that he found enjoyable, particularly with his partner. He felt he was neglecting his home life and friends and worried about his health given his excessive working hours. He felt stressed and out of control. There was considerable anxiety around his health and the possibility of sabotaging his relationship and friendships. This anxiety provided important clues about what was most important to him. I stayed phenomenologically engaged to explore his motivation for work and the values that were important to him further (as described in 1 above). That is, I didn't rush to prejudge the situation and assume that this was as it first appeared but instead explored – through encouraging James to describe his lifeworld – the assumptions underpinning his presenting concerns and goals. It emerged that whilst he enjoyed the respect he had achieved at work (and also the income that he earned) this was not key to his value system and it was clear that work was a means to an ends. Instead, he recognised through our early exploration that relationships and a healthy life were key to his world view. The phenomenological method ensured that I did

not prematurely work towards a goal that was not core to 'enhancing the performance' of James with-in both his working and personal life.

I identified a number of strengths demonstrated through his work, including his capacity to work tirelessly and achieve his goals, and challenged him to draw on this strength in achieving a new goal, of finding a 'better work-life balance', in line with the requirements of solution-focussed therapy (as described in 4 above). We then needed to work to make this goal clearer, more measurable and also achievable (as described in 2 above). The literature on goals is clear about the need to ensure that they are clear, measurable and achievable for effective coaching (Palmer & Whybrow, 2008). This involved detailed discussion of what needed to change for the balance to be better. This included a number of things such as the need to switch off his work phone when he went home. By identifying practical changes that could be effected (solutions to the problems he was facing) we became able to formulate a plan in which his goal could be successfully implemented. Identifying change is central to the practise of solution-focussed therapy with the general spirit that at the very least a client must seek to change something - anything - if progress is going to be made.

We also needed to explore possible barriers to achieving these changes, another key aspect of goal and solution focussed techniques. We did this through practical experiments and then reflective discussions of his experience. Any barriers were first measured using scales (simple descriptions of the difficulty from 0 to 100) and then after some practical intervention measured again to record progress (as described in 6 and 7 above). One of the first challenges was for him to change his mobile telephone use, switching it off when he went home. I asked him to try this for a week and keep a diary of what was occupying his thoughts when this was being carried out, with ratings of the difficulty he experienced in doing this at various points throughout the week. We then worked through his reflections and ratings to address any concerns. This included some key existential concerns around responsibility and choice, which we explored, and I encouraged him to weigh these up against his values and desire to live differently (as described in 3 above). He realised that he had to prioritise that which was most important to him and sustain the anxiety that emerged from chang-

ing his behaviour (indicated practically through his rating scores). Over the course of the next few months, he engaged in more and more practical experiments and found he was able to manage his anxious response and achieve his goal of finding a better work-life balance, or rather - in the more specific language we agreed - limit the intrusion of work into his home life so that he had more time and psychological space to engage in the relationships that truly sustained him and made his life worth living.

Conclusion

In this brief article I have sought to provide an introduction to a model of existential coaching practise that is, I believe, theoretically sound and also 'fit for purpose'. I have argued that it is not enough to simply employ a psychotherapeutic model directly within coaching, given the very different and specific needs of coaching practise. Conversely, I have also expressed concerns about the move towards a rather crude form of technical eclecticism where an 'anything goes' attitude is adopted, and theoretical concerns sacrificed to technique. Instead, I have offered a brief introduction to the approach to existential coaching that I have found successful in practise and which is also theoretically sound, bringing together ideas from existential therapy and solution-focussed therapy. The a-theoretical nature of SFT facilitates the integration of ideas from this model of therapy, which is eminently practical and suited to coaching, into the philosophically informed approach of existential psychotherapy. Key to successful working as a coach is a phenomenological attitude, the use of ideas from existentialism as a heuristic and the steady move towards a goal and solution focussed mode of practise.

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