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Personal Agency: The Existential-Phenomenological Perspective

There is an enormous diversity among psychologists on the issues of personal agency and autonomy. Some researches argue that both of them are illusions and reveal automaticity of higher mental processes (Bargh, Chen, Burrows, 1996; Bargh, Chartrand, 1999; Bargh, Ferguson, 2000). Others understand self as simply a socially constructed concept, and insist that the sense of personal agency is a set of positions within social networks (Auerbach, 1985; Cox & Lyddon, 1997; Richert, 2002). However, these perspectives provide little support for psychotherapy, which traditionally considers the development of one's personal agency as both a key aim and effective means of therapeutic change (van Deurzen, 2002; Cooper, 2003; Längle, 2000, 2008; McWilliams, 1994; Meekums, 2006; Rogers, 1951; Spinelli, 2001, 2005, 2007; Yalom, 1980).

Different forms of existential psychotherapy stress the importance of client's free choice and the process of meaning making and elaborated the ways to develop one's personal agency. At the same time, in modern psychology phenomenology of agency is rather neglected (Bayne et. al., 2007; Tsakiris, et. al., 2007) . In my presentation I would like to focus on existential-analytical ideas regarding personal agency and reflects upon their application in psychotherapy and counseling. Specifically, the phenomenological perspective on the issue will be provided. The central argument of my presentation is that, *from the phenomenological point of view, the 'core' of personal agency is the experience 'I can do it, I am able to do it'*. This experience helps a person to become aware of his or her ability to form life and, thus, amplifies one's personal agency. Moreover, I would like to prove that, in an extended sense, *every lived experience is a pre-reflective form of agency*. The latter statement theoretically proves the efficacy of the psychotherapeutic practice of agency's development, which is based on phenomenology.

The presentation consists of two parts. In the first part of my presentation I will briefly describe the theoretical background of my study and comment on the importance of phenomenology in the context of existential psychotherapy and counseling. The existential-analytical perspective on personal agency will be given in the second part, as well as the practical illustrations and some consideration regarding practical applications of this perspective. Please, feel free to ask me questions once the presentation is over.

Existential-Analytical Perspective on Personal Agency: Some Theoretical Ideas

The version of existential therapy that is examined in this presentation is called ‘existential analysis and logotherapy’; it has been developed by Längle based on the ideas of his teacher, V. Frankl. According to Längle, *existential analysis and logotherapy* – is a phenomenological approach to psychological counseling and psychotherapy, where the central theme is a person in his or her interaction with the world. The basic assumption is that the necessary condition and at the same time the means for achieving a fulfilling existence by an individual is the development of their spiritual dimension. This constructive spiritual power is called “personality” or “person”, in Längle’s terminology. Its key characteristic is a state of constant dialogue with the world and with itself. The aim of psychotherapy is to help the client to form a dialogue, which enables authentic positioning and responsible actions, and thus leads to the life with inner consent (Längle, 2008, 2012).

Phenomenology is commonly used among existential practitioners (Spinelli, 2007). However, different authors understand and apply it differently, so I would like to clarify the version of phenomenology utilized by existential analysis and logotherapy.

Based on the ideas of existential analysis and logotherapy (A. Längle), the process of elaboration of one’s personal agency can be phenomenological described as following. Owing to the openness and to the involvement in relationships, a person entirely, on a bodily, psychic, and spiritual level, is touched

by what is going on. The being affects him, leading to an immediate impression, which includes primary emotionality, spontaneous impulse, and phenomenal content. This immediate impression is a pre-reflective form of a position, and through negotiating it with a more generalized value system and conscience, it becomes an integrated emotionality. The acknowledgement of the phenomenal content – the “message of the world” about his or her life, which due to reflection clearly appears in consciousness – actualizes the spiritual personality (“person”). Owing to such careful and laborious work with the emotional experience, a person gains access to the area of subjective values and meanings: To things that touch and move him/her on a spiritual level (Längle, 2011, 2012, 2012a).

Thus, the existential-phenomenological way of the client’s development of personal agency: Is directed towards the search for an authentic answer to a situation through the work with emotional experience; presume a transition from senses and feelings to meanings and values directly presented in one’s consciousness (phenomenological content, in Längle’s terms); consider that the explicit meaning generates through an interchange between symbols and preverbal experience of living; actualize the dynamics of feelings, which leads to integration of emotional experience; invite the client for a dialogue with him/herself and for an active inner work on the border between the conscious and the unconscious experience.

Now, once the existential-phenomenological perspective on personal agency’s development has been briefly discussed, let us proceed to the phenomenological description of the experiencing of one’s agency.

‘I Can Do It, I am Able to Do It’: the Phenomenological Content of Personal Agency

Personal agency describes a specific mode of being: It refers to subjective awareness that one is initiating and executing valuable actions in the world. *From the phenomenological perspective, the ‘core’ of this mode is the experience of subjective power and is expressed in the experience “I can/ I am able”.* In other words, a person obtains the sense of agency by the means of these experiences. At

the same time these experiences amplify one's personal agency. Cumulative experiences of "I can/I am able" forms self-worth and prepare the person for acting and transforming their life.

In existential analysis and logotherapy emotional experiences are seen as a subjective connotation of values, which contains information about *how* that what occurs affects a person's life. Primary emotionality and spontaneous impulse predispose a person to a situation. Every experience relates a person to their internal and external worlds. This relationship is a starting point for agent's development. Thus, we can conclude *that every experience is a pre-reflective form of personal agency*. Phenomenological discovery of one's own agency happens by the means of experience "I can".

Applying the conception of the four fundamental motivations developed by Längle (Längle, 2011, 2012) to the issue of agency, we may distinguish between the four types of experience "I can". On the level of the first fundamental motivation personal agency refers to experiences 'I can be there, I can bear reality', "I can support my wholeness". On the level of the second fundamental motivation agency concerns one's ability to be truly alive and involved in life ("I can freely experience it"). On the level of the third fundamental motivation agency deals with intentions of a person, it may be expressed "I can be myself in relationships with other people and with the world". It leads to taking personal stands, forming one's opinions, drawing their personal boundaries. On the level of the fourth fundamental motivation, a person discovers their ability to meaningfully and voluntarily change the world. To be fruitful in the world is an essential component of one's personal agency. Development of one's agency is a broad theme, so in the context of existential analysis and logotherapy a wide range of psychotherapeutic methods was elaborated to cover different aspects of one's agency (Personal Existential Analysis, Personal Positioning, Will Strengthening Method, etc.). It is interesting that these methods do not address the experiences "I can / I am able" directly. From my point of view, a direct phenomenological

investigation of these experiences is useful and may be added to other methods; it may seriously help a client to restore their agency.

What are the applications of these ideas for practice? Let me briefly review how these ideas could be put into practice.

Since every lived experience is a pre-reflective form of agency, phenomenological psychotherapy itself leads to amplification of one's agency. To reinforce it specifically, practitioners may pay closer attention to phenomenological description of experiences "I can/ I am able".

From phenomenological perspective, personal agency is seen as a process of inner dialogue, which directs person's constant exchange with the world. The content of this inner dialogue is transition from experiencing life to acting. Based on the ideas discussed earlier, now I would like to provide two examples of moderating the inner dialogue, which strengthens one's agency, in existential practice.

When Ann (age 32) first came to my office, she was "devastated and despaired": Four months previously her mother had died, and her boyfriend had left her without any explanations two months after her mother's death. Ann's life before it was also tangled, so along with double losses she suffered from being not able to control her own life. I had the impression that she was tossing about having no reliable "anchor" in the world – feeling disconnected from herself and her agency. She obviously had a lot of unresolved feelings about her mother's death and her boyfriend hasty 'departure', but to start mourning her losses she definitely needed some safe inner space. So, the starting point of our conversations was discovering and restoring her agency.

Firstly, when listening to her story, I mirrored her the signs of her agentive presence during the illness of her mother: "It seems that it was hard for you, but you were able to find enough money and visit her in another city", "you could bear your fear", "What impresses me most of all is that even in these terrible circumstances you somehow were able to made this decision", "What was the worst about the funeral?... How could you survive it?". I worked with double

focus: On the one hand, I invited her to tell me her feelings, thoughts and actions during that period of time, on the other – emphasized the very capacity to act, which was underpinning them.

One of the central themes of our first session was abuse of Ann: She felt abused by her ex-boyfriend, by her family members, and even by her mother. Moreover, to some extent she justified such an attitude towards her, so she also suffered (without noticing it) from self-humiliation. Spontaneously, during our first conversation she mentioned the situation when her step-father protected her and acted justly to her. I asked her to describe this experience, focusing on her ability to provoke justice and careful attitude in other people: “How it was for you to get such attention from your step-father? ... How it was for you that you could provoke such feelings and actions in other people? Could you please tell me a little bit more about how it is for you now – to experience that you are able to receive justly and good attitude from others?”

During our next session we approached her fear in the same way. I asked her how the fear affected her life and what preferable possibilities were still available for her: “It looks like you are overwhelmed with fear now, what does it take from you? What can you do to decrease it? How it is for you – to feel that you are able to decrease it a little bit?”. Ann reported that such questioning helped her to re-establish her inner power, to feel more her capacity to form her life. It also brought visible relief to her: She became more confident and we were able to continue our work. During the following sessions we worked on her grief, reserving the focus on her experiences “I can”.

I would like to lay stress on the importance of phenomenological analysis of experiences ‘I can/ am able’ – cognitively listing the available possibilities is not enough to strengthen one’s agency.

In other case Kate (age 27) complained of self-criticism. She said that she had had this problem as long as she remembered herself and described it as a “heavy load” pressing her. I asked her how heavy it was at the moment and what “weight” she accepted to bear. “Now it weights like a hundred kilograms, and I

would like it to be 20 kilos”. Lately during the session she told me that the load had weighted “a ton”. I was impressed by this shift and shared my amusement with her: “It seems that you have reduced it from a ton to a hundred kilos. You were able to reduce it dramatically! Could you please tell me how did you do it? ... How it is for you that you are able to decrease the load so dramatically?”. Again, it is important to evoke the experience of this possibility in the client and to start their inner dialogue about it; simply naming the possibilities does not really work.

What I’m trying to show in these brief practical illustrations is that practitioners can directly address the core of one’s agency – the experience “I can / I am able”, and in doing so, strengthen the client’s agency. For instance, when working with trauma, or loss, a practitioner may confront a client’s feeling of helplessness by the means of a delicate phenomenological investigation of what was or is now possible for them. It is also important to appreciate one’s subjectivity and to invite the client to focus on the experiences “I can” and to integrate them into their self. Focusing on these experiences helps the client to broaden their inner dialogue and to get in contact with their agency.

Conclusions:

In a nutshell, from the existential-phenomenological perspective the core of personal agency is experience “I can / I am able”. In an extended sense, every lived experience is a pre-reflective form of agency, and a person ‘appropriates’ it in experience “I can”. At the same time, in the psychotherapy the experiences “I can” are rarely addressed directly. However, their phenomenological investigation may be extremely fruitful for the clients: It helps the clients to integrate their ability to act into self-image, and, in doing so, to strengthen their agency. So, the special phenomenological focus of working with agency is discussed.

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