
Meaninglessness, Death, and Responsibility: Existential Themes in Career Counselling

Corinne V. Koehn

Victoria, B.C.

Résumé

Le point de vue adopté dans cet article est que la pensée existentielle convient au counseling professionnel. On y traite de trois questions existentielles: l'absence de sens, la mort et la responsabilité, en démontrant la possibilité de les intégrer au counseling. On y identifie des exercices visant à introduire ces thèmes au client. Selon l'auteur, un examen franc et intime de ces motifs existentiels entre le conseiller et le client facilite, dans certains cas, les décisions relatifs à la carrière de ce dernier.

Abstract

The position taken in this article is that existential thought is appropriate and applicable to career counselling. Three existential concerns, meaninglessness, death, and responsibility, are discussed and their applicability to career counselling is demonstrated. Career counselling exercises which help to introduce the client to these themes are identified. It is the belief of the author that career decision-making is enhanced, in some instances, by the client and counsellor engaging in an open and intimate examination of these existential motifs.

My work as a career/employment counsellor has inspired me to experiment with a variety of vocational counselling tools, such as interest inventories, personality inventories, skill assessments, and lifestyle evaluations. Although all of these exercises have proved themselves valuable, as have the extensive dialogues which have resulted from the interpretation of them, I have discovered that what is missing is a deeper inquiry—an inquiry that touches the very spirit of an individual and exposes the deep concerns which plague human existence. Without this inquiry into the universal dreads that my client experiences and which haunt us all, my career counselling seems incomplete. My clients and I have moved to deeper levels of exploration and insight by allowing ourselves to spend some time with existential thought.

Existentialism is concerned with *the individual's confrontation with the givens of existence* (Yalom, 1980). The "givens" of existence are certain ultimate concerns that are an unavoidable part of the human condition. Three ultimate concerns are meaninglessness, death, and responsibility. They are by no means the exclusive experience of clients seeking counsel; they are the experience of all individuals by virtue of being human. Although the concerns are universal, the manner in which each person experiences them is unique.

Several authors have commented on the application of existentialism in personal counselling and psychotherapy (Arbuckle, 1975; Frankl, 1967, 1975, 1978; Van Kaam, 1966; Yalon, 1980). Existential thought

can also readily be incorporated into career counselling. It is not my intention that the existential approach replace other career counselling methods, but rather that it can add an important dimension to career decision making. This paper will demonstrate that the existential motifs of meaninglessness, death, and responsibility have a rightful place in career counselling. Interwoven with an examination of the client's interests, skills, needs, and lifestyle can be an inquiry into the ultimate concerns of human existence. The result is a deep awareness of what is important to oneself, and a vocational choice that allows the client to live authentically in work.

MEANINGLESSNESS

Imagine a happy group of morons who are engaged in work. They are carrying bricks in a open field. As soon as they have stacked all the bricks at one end of the field, they proceed to transport them to the opposite end. This continues without stop and every day of the year they are busy doing the same thing. One day one of the morons stops long enough to ask himself what he is doing. He wonders what purpose there is in carrying the bricks. And from that instant on he is not quite as content with his occupation as he had been before.

I am the moron who wonders why he is carrying the bricks. (cited in Cantril & Bumstead, 1960, p. 308)

This was part of a suicide note of a 28-year-old man who could find no meaning in life. He was disengaged from life to such an extent that he found his existence to be insignificant and trivial. With no purpose for being, why bother being at all?

The existential position is that we all struggle, either consciously or unconsciously, with this "given" of existence, the meaninglessness of life. The universe holds no grand design for us; there is no predetermined purpose for my life or yours. The world is indifferent to our aspirations. And yet, as human beings, *we demand that our existence count*. Viktor Frankl, a world renowned psychiatrist who solidified his thoughts on meaninglessness during his containment at Auschwitz, claims that "the striving to find a meaning in life is a primary motivational force in man" (Frankl, 1967, p. 34).

But how do we find meaning in a meaningless world? If the universe is lacking a predetermined plan for me, how do I fulfil my need to discover a reason for my existence? The answer lies within ourselves. Each of us must discover our own meaning, and claim for ourselves our personal *raison d'être*. We may find meaning through our work, creativity, deeds, meetings with nature, and encounters with our fellow human beings.

We will each differ as to what we experience as meaningful. However, our different meanings will share a common quality, that of self-transcendence: "the meaning which a being has to fulfill is something beyond himself, it is never just himself" (Frankl, 1967, p. 26). A crucial part of meaningful living, therefore, is a commitment to an "other," be it a

cause or another person. It is precisely this commitment, the movement towards someone or something other than oneself, and the forthcoming sense of total engagement, which makes meaningful living intense and satisfying.

The experience of life devoid of meaning has been called the “existential vacuum” or “existential frustration” (Frankl, 1967). While meaningful living is characterized by feelings of involvement, fulfilment, and a powerful sense of doing something worthwhile, the “vacuum” is characterized by feelings of inner emptiness, boredom, and apathy. A person experiencing this syndrome will appear cynical, without direction, and unwilling to put much effort into various activities, questioning the value of it all. Frankl (1967) describes the vacuum as an existential despair which is spiritual, and not pathological, in nature.

Applications to Career Counselling

The theme of meaning in life has notable significance in career decision-making. We express the meaning we assign ourselves through our daily activities. One very important channel through which we may fulfil our meaning, therefore, is the activity which consumes at least half of our waking day, our work. In my counselling I endeavour to help my clients discover the characteristics of work which are most likely to promote for them feelings of engagement, commitment, fulfilment, self-transcendence, and worthiness. Work which promotes these feelings may be called “meaningful work.” Ideally, a client is able to fulfil through “meaningful work” some or all aspects of his or her “meaning in life.”

Discussions about meaningful living are a powerful source of dialogue in career counselling. I have found that clients of every age and occupation display a willingness for discussing what is important to them, some exhibiting a sudden enthusiasm for life as they describe what they find meaningful, and others shedding tears as they become aware of what they have done without for so long. Dialogues such as these always bring us closer. As with any subject, the career counsellor should approach the discussion with care and thought. A few guidelines to consider are:

1. Listen carefully for indications of the client having previously experienced a sense of either meaninglessness or meaningfulness. Asking clients what they enjoyed or did not enjoy about previous jobs will often lead into appropriate discussions about meaning in work. Usually clients will not actually use the word “meaningless” to describe the experience, but will state that “the job was pointless,” or “I didn’t feel like I was doing anything important,” or “by the end of the day I didn’t really like myself anymore.” Discussions about volunteer work, leisure activities, and favourite school subjects also gives valuable information about what the client finds meaningful.

2. Notice how the client is experiencing his or her world. Does the client seem cynical and apathetic about life in general, or motivated and

optimistic? Similarly, is the client sceptical or confident of the value of career counselling? A client who is in the existential vacuum may require different interventions and career exploration exercises than one who is not. Frequently, an appropriate goal in career counselling is to move the client from the pit of despair to the realm of hope and possibility.

3. As the client struggles to discover what is meaningful, be careful not to *prescribe* a meaning. The nature that meaning in life will take must be the client's own discovery. It is important, therefore, that as counsellors we are aware of our own meaning in life, and are able to spare our clients our personal biases as to what is meaningful and what is not.

4. Look for the quality of self-transcendence as the client describes what is meaningful. Frankl (1967) states that true meaning includes a commitment to either another person or a cause. If self-transcendence is absent and the client's interpretation of meaningful work is totally self-serving, consider helping the client re-examine his or her values and beliefs.

5. Use the client's interpretation of meaningful work as a reference point throughout discussions about various careers. For example, meaningful work for a particular client may mean "contributing creative ideas towards work projects." As each occupational choice is being considered, ask the client if creativity is an integral part of that occupation.

The exploration of meaning in life and meaningful work may also be approached by giving the client an inventory on values. Our value system helps to determine what we find meaningful, and, similarly, our interpretation of meaningfulness gives rise to values. "Work Values" (France, 1982) and "Your Values" (University and College Placement Association, 1982) are two surveys which help clients identify and prioritize values. A discussion of clients' responses to the items is a useful means of helping clients explore which values are important for them to realize during working hours.

DEATH

An undeniable truth in life is that each of us is going to die. Existential psychotherapy maintains that the fear of death is central to every individual's existence. This dread "haunts as does nothing else; it rumbles continuously under the surface; it is a dark, unsettling presence at the rim of consciousness" (Yalom, 1980, p. 27). Our preoccupation with death, be it conscious or unconscious, consumes a substantial portion of our energy:

Death transcendence is a major motif in human existence—from the most deeply personal internal phenomena, our defenses, our motivations, our dreams and nightmares, to the most public macro-societal structures, our monuments, theologies, ideologies, slumber cemeteries, embalmings, our stretch into space, . . . our yearning for lasting fame. (Yalom, 1980, p. 41)

Yalom (1980) notes that although the *physicality* of death destroys an individual, the *idea* of death can save the individual. We can use the recognition of our mortality to enrich our lives. Inspired by the finiteness of life, we can attempt to experience each moment to its fullest potential. Furthermore, the idea of death urges us to find meaning in life:

The man who knows he will die wastes no time in attacking the problem of finding meaning and fulfillment in life. The pressure of the thought of death is a persistent and nagging (and most effective) reminder that he is coerced to make some sense of his life, and that his is to do it *now*. He who has faced death adopts a no-nonsense approach to the business of living successfully. (Koestenbaum, 1971, p. 27)

Through awareness of death, we can strive to make our lives worthwhile.

Applications to Career Counselling

The theme of death may be used in career counselling as an impetus for clients to search for meaning in life and meaningful work. Discussions about death encourage clients to examine the quality of their lives to date and to reach some decisions as to what else they need to do in order to feel that they have had meaningful, fulfilling lives. Helpful questions include: “What do you want to have accomplished before you die?” “What are five words which describe you in your work up to this moment? Which five words would you want to describe yourself in your work before you die?” “What, if anything, do you want people to remember you for?” and “What do you think is the purpose of death?” To the latter question, the counsellor may suggest that perhaps one purpose of death is to motivate us to make the most of our lives.

An exercise which encourages clients to evaluate their lives *as they have been lived*, and their lives *as they could be lived*, is “The Epitaph.” The client writes two epitaphs for a homework assignment. The first is an epitaph of what the client believes people would write if the client were to die today. The second is what the client would want to have written on the epitaph. Discussion focuses on the similarities and differences between the two epitaphs. Following is an example of the insights gained by a client whom I will call “Peter.” Peter was in his late 20’s, had dropped out of university after his first year, and had since worked at numerous jobs as an unskilled labourer. Our conversation went something like this:

Peter: The epitaph describing what people would write says, “Carefree and without a worry, he had a hell of a good time.” And the one I’d want people to write says, “He had the courage to love and cry with the people he helped.” They’re really different from each other, aren’t they?

Co: Well, they do give me quite different impressions of you. How would you describe the differences between the two?

Peter: In the first one, I’m kind of a happy-go-lucky sort of guy, just living for myself. In the second one, I’m more deeply involved and doing something for others.

Co: Which would you say more accurately describes who you really are now?

Peter: Up to now I've been living like the first epitaph. Yet I *feel* like I want to do something important for people, but I haven't *lived* that way. People know only one part of me, the superficial part.

Co: I see. How do you feel about them having the wrong impression of you?

Peter: Frustrated, and, in a way, scared, I guess. One day I'll die and I'll not have let anyone really know me. It's important for me now to change that.

Co: So you're feeling some urgency, because you are aware that one day you'll die, of wanting people to know who you really are. It's been hard for you to show that part of yourself that is deeply loving and concerned. Peter, what do you think has been holding you back?

Peter: I guess I'm afraid of failing, of not accomplishing what I've set out to do, of feeling that whatever I try to do will never be enough.

The dialogue continued with Peter describing his fear of failing, his despair over living a life lacking in emotional substance, and his fear about dying without becoming who he really wanted to be. Peter decided to return to university and become a physician, a dream he harboured 10 years ago and had discarded.

Any discussion using the death theme should be approached with caution. Such a dialogue may evoke considerable anxieties in some clients. Therefore, discussions about death are best initiated only after the counsellor has spent ample time with the client and can reasonably predict what the impact will be.

RESPONSIBILITY

A key concept in existential philosophy is that of personal responsibility. The existential stance is that each of us is responsible for our own attitudes and actions. We are personally responsible for what we make of our lives, and whether or not we fulfil our potential. Furthermore, each of us has a responsibility to discover our meaning in life:

Man is not "driven." Man decides. Man is free. But we prefer to speak of responsibility instead of freedom. Responsibility implies something for which we are responsible—namely, the accomplishment of concrete, personal tasks and demands, the realization of that unique and individual meaning which every one of us has to fulfill. (Frankl, 1967, p. 126)

Every day we are confronted with the element of choice. We cannot escape this freedom. The choices we make may be "authentic" or "inauthentic." An authentic choice is a decision made from the centre of one's being; it has the quality of feeling "true." One might say that the decision "fits." Koestenbaum (1974, p. 13) describes an authentic decision as one which (a) is made by the individual with a minimum of external influences. Those external factors which do have an influence are freely chosen by the individual; (b) is made deliberately and not unconsciously; (c) is based on what one knows of human nature and the kind of person one

uniquely is; and (d) “feels” right, brings relief and joy rather than burdens. Inauthentic choice, on the other hand, is based on “what other people might think.” It has the quality of feeling awkward; it does not “fit”; it brings forth feelings of entrapment. While an authentic choice is an expression of who one really is, an inauthentic choice merely represents who others want us to be.

We are responsible for our choices, whether they are authentic or not. We cannot even evade this responsibility by refusing to make choices; choosing not to choose is a decision in itself. Responsibility, therefore, is an inherent part of the human condition, an “ultimate concern” for us all.

Applications to Career Counselling

Career counselling is a rich domain for the concept of personal responsibility. Clients make numerous choices during the career counselling process, from seemingly simple decisions such as choosing how to respond to inventory items, to more complicated ones such as making a final career choice. The astute counsellor is alert to outside pressures from individuals who try to dissolve the client of this responsibility. A parent or spouse, for example, may try to persuade the client to follow a particular career path. Or a social agency may try to choose for the client an “appropriate” occupation. These attempts to decide for the client may arise from a wish to *coerce* the client for one’s own self-serving purposes, or to *rescue* the client from the anxiety of decision-making. Coercion and rescue attempts which are successful invariably lead to the same disastrous results: a client who is not fully engaged in the decision-making process and an ensuing inauthentic career choice.

Authentic choice is a crucial component in my career counselling. Usually my clients and I take some time to discuss how they make decisions in general. Are their decisions primarily a product of their own inner wisdom or are they a product of giving in to other people’s persuasions? I encourage my clients to begin moving through each day with an awareness of how they make various decisions, and I help them distinguish between authentic and inauthentic choice. I invariably point out that career decisions, also, are either authentic or inauthentic, and that it is up to the client which type of decision he or she will pursue.

Determining whether or not a career choice is authentic is accomplished through thoughtful discussion around how the client feels about the decision, what significant others want the client to do, and how the decision relates to the client’s values, interests, needs, skills, and lifestyles. The counsellor may also use one or both of the following exercises to help assess the authenticity of the career choice.

“Focusing” is an experiential exercise which helps clients to come to a bodily felt understanding of how they experience a particular problem or decision. Clients can use focusing to discover whether or not a decision “fits” with them. In career counselling, focusing helps clients become

aware of how they experience the potential career choices which they are considering. Interested readers are invited to read *Focusing* by Eugene Gendlin (1981) for a detailed description of the focusing technique.

Clients may also be assisted in discovering their true feeling about career decisions through "guided fantasy." Clients are asked to close their eyes and imagine themselves in a typical workday of the occupation they have chosen. The counsellor guides the client through the day's activities from awakening in the morning, to working throughout the day, and finally retiring at night. Clients pay particular attention to the details of their environment, their duties at work, how they feel about the day's activities, and their feelings regarding the people they encounter at work. After the fantasy, clients are asked to share with the counsellor the impressions and feelings that were evoked during the fantasy. Feelings of fulfilment, excitement, and engagement indicate that the client is truly optimistic about the chosen career. Feelings of resentment, burden, depression, and extreme frustration may indicate that the choice is an authentic one and that the client needs to re-examine the career to determine its suitability.

The client who comes to acknowledge personal responsibility for choices made may begin to experience a feeling of existential guilt. Existential guilt arises from a recognition of having lived less than fully. We regret our lack of effort to reach our potential. We grieve for our unlived lives. While "neurotic" guilt and "real" guilt arise from transgressions against another person, "existential" guilt may be considered a transgression against oneself (Yalom, 1980).

Existential guilt is a common experience for clients in career counselling. After reviewing their own personal histories, some clients will remark in exasperation and despair, "I have done nothing with my life!" Existential guilt is undoubtedly painful to experience and come to terms with. Nevertheless, the potential exists for the presence of guilt to carry an individual forward towards positive change and fulfilment. Therefore, a client's experience of existential guilt must be openly acknowledged when it is presented, not ignored nor denied. Participating in a dialogue about the role of existential guilt in our lives helps the client understand the uncomfortable feeling and may inspire the client to become more fully committed to career exploration and the decision-making process.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The career counselling setting is an appropriate arena for individuals to confront the "ultimate concerns" of human existence. Meaninglessness, death, and responsibility are three existential themes which have been discussed and which are pertinent issues to consider when making a career choice. This deeper inquiry into the "givens" of existence helps

promote authentic decision-making, commitment, goal-setting, and engagement in work.

Dialogues regarding the existential concerns which clients experience engenders an intimacy which is precious and deserving of the greatest respect. It is critical that the relationship between counsellor and client be personable and highly valued. As we formulate the questions and search for answers, my client and I must both struggle to present ourselves honestly and revealingly to each other. Through a relationship of intimacy, honesty, and acceptance, my client feels free to openly examine life as it has been lived, confirm or redefine values, and establish new goals to be realized. Together, thoughtfully and with care, we begin to translate these insights into authentic career choice.

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About the Author

Corinne Koehn has worked with career counselling in a variety of college, university, and community agency settings. Her professional interests include career counselling, existential psychotherapy, and communication skills training.

Correspondence should be addressed to the author at 9-2861 Craigowan, Victoria, B.C. V9B 1M9.