

Research and Evaluation Issues in Existential Psychotherapy

Jim Lantz, Ph.D.

Existential psychotherapists generally have serious reservations and concerns about the use of systematic experimental research methods to generate knowledge about the practice and effectiveness of existential treatment. For many existential psychotherapists such experimental research methods are best replaced with the process of participation. The primary methods of participation research described in this article are: Case Story Research, Case Transcript Research, Single-Subject Case Research, Before-After Field Study Research, and Grounded Theory Research.

KEY WORDS: existential; psychotherapy; research.

Over the years, many psychotherapists have made sincere, competent, and creative attempts to produce and promote rigorous experimental research evaluation studies to find out which approaches to psychotherapy and which psychotherapy procedures “work best” in a variety of different clinical practice situations. Over the years insurance companies, policy makers, case management organizations, public clinics and many university professors have praised the use of such research studies to help us understand which treatment approaches should be reimbursed by insurance companies and/or mental health funding boards and which treatment approaches should not be funded or encouraged by any funding source (Nugent, Sieppert and Hudson, 2001). It is often reported that such research will save money, improve clinical practice, and improve the direction of funded clinical research practice (Nugent, Sieppert and Hudson, 2001).

Although many behavioral, cognitive, strategic, solution focused, and other procedurally based treatment approaches have produced helpful and competent experimental practice evaluation studies that provide some evidence about what

Address correspondence to Jim Lantz, Ph.D., College of Social Work, Ohio State University, 1947 College Road, Columbus, Ohio 43210-1162; e-mail: meritt.25@osu.edu.

“works best” in different clinical situations, practitioners of existential psychotherapy often view such research efforts with considerable skepticism and concern (Boss, 1963; Frankl, 2000; Kondrat, 1992; Lantz, 2000; Sonneman, 1954; Yalom, 1980). The purpose of this article is to outline and describe some of the issues and concerns often raised by existential philosophers and existential psychotherapists about experimental clinical research and some of the evaluation research methods often utilized in the broader field of counseling and psychotherapy. A second goal is to describe a number of participation research approaches that this author believes would be considered useful and adequate research efforts from an existential point of view.

WHAT IS EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOTHERAPY?

Existential psychotherapy is a treatment orientation that is based upon the ideas and concepts found in existential philosophy, existential literature, and existential art (Frankl, 1967; Yalom, 1980). Existential psychotherapists generally believe that good and effective psychotherapy is not procedurally based, but instead evolves out of the therapist’s willingness to utilize the self to facilitate relationship, action and reflection experiences that help the client work through and struggle with the ultimate issues of human life during the treatment process (Frankl, 1969; May, 1983; Mullan and Sangiuliano, 1964; Whitaker, 1976; Yalom, 1980). For many existential psychotherapists the four ultimate issues of human life are death, meaning, freedom, and isolation (Boss, 1963; Frankl, 1959; May, 1983; Yalom, 1980). In existential psychotherapy, it is believed that each client is a unique person and that the process of psychotherapy should facilitate the growth and development of each unique person at the physical, psychosocial, and spiritual dimensions of existence (Frankl, 1969; Lantz, 2000, 2001; Lantz and Gregoire, 2003; Sonneman, 1954). In existential psychotherapy the therapist does not believe that it is possible to find one method of treatment that works with every client but understands that existential psychotherapy must “always” be tailored to meet the unique needs of the unique client and to utilize the unique capabilities of the unique psychotherapist (Frankl, 2000; Mullan and Sangiuliana, 1964). The existential psychotherapist is most interested in learning the many ways that people can change during treatment so that the therapist has many intervention options that can be used during the individualizing (i.e. tailoring) process of existential psychotherapy. The following ideas and concepts may help clarify the research process and the methods often valued by the existential psychotherapist.

PARTICIPATION AS A RESEARCH PROCESS

Most of the existential psychotherapists known to this author believe that participation in the treatment process is a more useful way to learn about

effective treatment intervention and/or how to become a better psychotherapist than conducting experimental treatment evaluation studies. Boss(1963), Frankl (1959), Mahrer (2000), May (1983), Whitker (1989), and Yalom (1980) have all reported that becoming a good therapist demands that psychotherapists rigorously and consistently expose themselves to the involvements, experiences, commitments, encounters, vulnerability, fidelity and the responsibilities that occur in a treatment relationship with a real client requesting help. This is different from the objective, experimental and distant relationship generally recommended for use by the researcher in well controlled psychotherapy outcome research that often utilizes volunteer student clients rather than real clients. A sample of this existential attitude can be obtained by remembering Gabriel Marcel's (1948) idea that one can only "know" God through participation in a relationship with God (i.e. prayer) while to know "about" God occurs through abstract and "experimental" thought (i.e. Theology). From the existential point of view, "knowing" psychotherapy comes about through experience and participation in a helping relationship and "knowing about" psychotherapy occurs through well-controlled experimental research evaluation methods (Lantz, 2000). Existential psychotherapists prefer to "know" rather than to "know about" (Boss, 1963; Frankl, 2000; Lantz, 1978, 1993, 1999; Lantz and Lantz, 1991; Yalom, 1980).

THE ISSUE OF FREEDOM

Well-controlled experimental practice evaluation research is designed to discern which treatment approach or activity "works best" with what kinds of client and/or client problems. In such research, control group subjects are given no treatment, experimental group A is generally given one form of treatment, and experimental group B is given a second form of treatment. All internal and external variables are controlled (as best as can be done) and it is considered possible to then find out (through the evaluation measures) what "works best." Such classical experimental research designs are based upon the assumption that change comes from the intervention activity and/or intervention approach (Nugent, Sieppert, and Hudson, 2001). Existential psychotherapists (Boss, 1963; Frankl, 1969; Kondrat, 1992; Lantz, 1978; May, 1983; Sonneman, 1954; Willis, 1994) do not believe in this basic research assumption.

In existential psychotherapy, clients are considered to have freedom (Frankl, 1959; Yalom, 1980). In existential psychotherapy it is believed that change occurs if and when a client uses human freedom and decides to change and to act in a more healthy and functional way (Bugental, 1976; May, 1983; Yalom, 1980). In this view, it is the task of the therapist to use relationship, action, and reflection activities to facilitate the client's awareness of their human freedom (May, 1983; Yalom, 1980). In existential psychotherapy, it is believed that whenever the therapist or the client begins to believe that change comes from the therapist or from the

therapist's treatment methods, then the client will be discouraged from utilizing their human freedom and will often start to deny responsibility for their life (May, 1983; Yalom, 1980). In an existential approach to psychotherapy it is believed that human freedom atrophies whenever the client externalizes responsibility and freedom and places them upon the therapist or the therapist's treatment activities (Boss, 1963; May, 1983; Yalom, 1980).

If human freedom does in fact exist, it is very possible that a psychotherapist could do great work and that the client could respond to this work by using freedom to decide not to change. It is also possible that the therapist could do bad work and the client would use freedom and decide to change in spite of the therapist's bad work and/or blunders. From an existential perspective, the fact of human freedom calls into great question the adequacy of experimental research designs that rely upon the ideas of external and internal validity to tell us much of importance about what works best during the practice of psychotherapy (Kondrat, 1992; Lantz, 2000).

KNOWLEDGE RICHNESS

The purpose of experimental research is to attempt to find out with precision and clarity "what works best" with what kind of client requesting help. The goals of clinical experimental research are to clearly understand what techniques, treatment activities and treatment methods should be used with what kind of problem clients and/or client situations (Nugent, Sieppert, and Hudson, 2001). Experimental evaluation researchers seem to consistently believe that such knowledge clarity about intervention methods can be achieved by utilizing well-controlled experimental designs and deductive hypothesis testing research methods.

In existential psychotherapy, the clear, precise knowledge that is desired in experimental, research is considered surface knowledge, flat knowledge and superficial knowledge (Curry, 1967; Kondrat, 1992; Lantz, 2000). The existential psychotherapist is more interested in inductive, rich, deep and unclear knowledge developed over time in a relationship with a unique client and/or unique clinical situation (Corlis and Rabe, 1969; Kondrat, 1992; Lantz, 2000; Van den Berg, 1955). Such deep, rich and inductive knowledge is the kind of knowledge that Carl Whitaker (1976) recommended in his classic article "The Hindrance of Theory in Clinical Work." The rich knowledge derived in existential psychotherapy does not give precise, easy answers (May, 1983). Instead, it assumes that the existential psychotherapist must continuously struggle with the reality of uncertainty provided by existential inquiry rather than the erroneous comfort and confidence provided by experimental clinical research (Lantz, 2000; May, 1983; Yalom, 1980).

EXISTENTIAL RESEARCH AND INQUIRY

Existential philosophers and psychotherapists answer the question "What is possible to know"? by saying that human beings (clients and therapists) can know

and experience the “human condition” (Buber, 1958; Marcel, 1948; Yalom, 1980). To the questions “How can human beings know?” the existentialist’s answer is by rigorous participation in life and in life with the clients who came to the therapist requesting help (Frankl, 1969; Lantz, 2000; Sonnemann, 1954; Weigert, 1949; Yalom, 1980).

Although it is true that the existential psychotherapist is deeply suspicious of classical, experimental evaluation research methods, it is not accurate to assume that the existential psychotherapist is against inquiry or rigorous study and reflection that increases the psychotherapists understanding and awareness of intervention “opportunities” or “potentials” that could be of help to a client requesting service. Although the existential psychotherapist does not value the classical experimental outcome study, he or she does greatly value awareness and knowledge that evolves out of “participation” with clients over time and from rigorous reflection about such participation (Bugental, 1976; Kondrat, 1992; Lantz, 2000; Sonneman, 1959; Whitaker, 1976; Yalom, 1980). From an existential point of view the process of inquiry is best, and realistically facilitated through the “report of participation” between the psychotherapist and the client receiving and requesting help (Lantz, 2000).

THE REPORT OF PARTICIPATION

The report of participation between therapist and client has three basic functions in existential psychotherapy. The first function is to help the existential psychotherapist reflect and self-supervise in a rigorous and in depth way about the contact and participation processes of his or her work and treatment with a specific client who is requesting help (Lantz, 2000). The second feature is to facilitate the kind of reflection by the existential psychotherapist that will help the therapist individualize and tailor the treatment process in his or her work with a unique client requesting help (Lantz, 2000). The third feature is to communicate the therapist’s understandings about the treatment process discovered in participation with one or more clients to other therapists who value the report of participation as a way to gain insight, awareness, knowledge and practice wisdom about what “can work” and/or be helpful to clients requesting help and what ideas, activities and practice concepts are being used by other psychotherapists that might have value and usefulness in his or her own efforts to tailor and individualize treatment that the therapist is currently conducting or will conduct in the future (Lantz, 1993, 2000). Such participation reports are valuable in reporting treatment “possibilities” to other psychotherapists (Kondrat, 1992; Lantz, 2000).

THE FORMAT OF THE PARTICIPATION REPORT

Although there are literally thousands of different formats that could be utilized in participation report research, it is this author’s opinion that five specific

formats are particularly helpful. These five inquiry forms are: 1) case stories, 2) case transcripts, 3) single subject case design studies, 4) before-after field studies, and 5) grounded theory studies.

Case Stories

A case story is an in depth subjective presentation of a treatment experience with one or more clients (Frankl, 1989; Lantz, 1978, 1993). Although this form of participation report is primarily subjective it is generally done in a rigorous manner that respects and uses the reporter's ability to struggle hard to control subjective phenomenological errors and/or countertransference phenomena distortions in the story that is being presented (Corlis and Rabe, 1969; Lantz, 2000). Students in the various mental health professions almost always report that many of the case stories that they are asked to read during graduate training have been of great benefit in terms of helping them develop their practice skills, their motivation to continue to train and be a good psychotherapist and in their acceptance of the values, ideals and practice concepts that are a part of the psychotherapy professions. In this author's mind Bugental's (1976) *The search for existential identity*, and Yalom's (1987) *Love's executioner*, are outstanding examples of existential case story presentations that can have positive influence in the life and development of the professional psychotherapist. Such reports are highly valued research projects in the existential orientation to mental health treatment (Kondrat, 1992) and have been utilized by many existential psychotherapists over the years to present their practice wisdom findings (Boss, 1963; Lantz, 1978; May, 1983; Willis, 1994; Yalom, 1980).

Case Transcripts

In many university and institute psychotherapy training programs audio-visual or audio case transcripts are presented as a method of helping the person in training learn what is possible, what sometimes works and what sometimes does not work. Existential psychotherapists (May, 1983), experiential psychotherapists (Mahrer, 2000) and family therapists (Lantz, 1978, 1993, 2000) have been especially positive about the use of tape recording as a research method and the use of tape recorded treatment sessions as a method of presenting research findings. In many psychotherapy training centers, psychotherapy students are asked to watch the tapes of a psychotherapy session and then the members of the training group discuss and analyze the taped treatment session to discover new insights, ideas, intervention possibilities and additional practice wisdom. This author (Lantz, 1978, 1993, 2000) has consistently utilized psychotherapy transcripts in his books and in his university and institute teaching. The case transcript participation report is

especially useful in providing detail richness and the complexities of the treatment process (Lantz, 1978, 1993, 2000).

Single-Subject Case Design Studies

In many psychology, social work, nursing, counseling and psychiatry training and/or residency programs, single-subject case design is taught as the evaluation method of choice for the mental health practitioner. Existential psychotherapists generally do appreciate this method of evaluation and research because it can be used in a way that respects the clients individually, facilitates the process of tailoring during the practice of psychotherapy and does not “require” that treatment be withheld or delayed for purposes of research methodology (Sonneman, 1954; Lantz, 1979). Single subject case design can be done in a way that incorporates and values both the client’s and the therapist’s subjectivity but then can triangulate such subjectivity through the use of accepted and valid objective measures of client change (Nugent, Sieppert and Hudson, 2001). Although single subject case design can not “always” tell us if people changed because of treatment, it can help us both subjectively and objectively discover how much people have changed or not changed during the treatment process (Lantz, 1979; Lantz and Gregoire, 2003; Nugent, Sieppert and Hudson, 2001). Many existential psychotherapists value the single-subject design (Frankl, 1969; Kondrat, 1992; Lantz, 1979, 1986, 2001; May, 1983; Yalom, 1980) because it honors the client’s freedom, individually and the richness of the client’s existence.

Before-After Field Studies

In existential psychotherapy a before-after field study is an attempt to provide existential psychotherapy to a client population group that shows a given problem and/or concern and to then evaluate such treatment in order to see if change did occur during treatment (Frankl, 1969; Lantz, 1974, 1978, 1993, 1996; Lantz and Gregoire, 2000a, 2000b; Van den Berg, 1955). In the existential field study method of research the initial evaluation (base-point evaluation) occurs at the start of treatment and further evaluation occurs minimally at both termination and at a follow-up evaluation. In all three evaluation periods both subjective and objective measures are used and a number of different statistical analysis methods are utilized to confirm or deny the null-hypothesis that no change has occurred between intake, termination and the follow-up evaluation in the client population group that is being studied (Lantz, 1978, 1999, in press). Again this study design can not tell us if change occurred because of treatment but can tell us if significant change did occur during treatment (Lantz, 2000; Lantz and Gregoire, 2000a, 2000b). This type of field evaluation is used by existential psychotherapists because again it does not

withhold treatment from any client, it does not disrupt the tailoring of treatment to meet the needs of each study subject and because it honors the ideas of human freedom and the uniqueness of every client requesting help (Lantz, in press). This author has utilized this type of field evaluation study in treatment with Vietnam Veterans (Lantz, 1974, 1991, 1993; Lantz and Gregoire, 2000a), with hypersomatic couples and families (Lantz, 1978, 1992, 1993), with medically ill clients (Lantz, 1996; Lantz and Gregoire, 2000b), with families that include a schizophrenic family member (Lantz, 1978), with post parental couples (Lantz, 1999) and with older adult couples (Lantz and Raiz, in press). The approach does not disrupt the quality of treatment and does provide some evidence about the effectiveness of the treatment approach, (Lantz, 1978, 2000, in press; Nugent, Sieppert and Hudson, 2001).

Grounded Theory Studies

The final participation report study form that is frequently valued by existential psychotherapists and is compatible with the ideas, values, and ethics of most existential treatment philosophies is the grounded theory research study (Lantz, 2002). A grounded theory study is a qualitative, phenomenological and inductive study approach that hopes to discover data, data themes and emerging theory that is grounded in observation of the study population (Glasser and Strauss, 1967; Lantz, 1987, 2002). In such a study the researcher can identify a client, a group of clients, or a vulnerable population that has already changed, developed and progressed and then utilize open ended reflection and questions to obtain the research subject's ideas about why they changed, how they progressed and why they were able to grow. Such a study can become a credible study through the use of qualitative research methods such as prolonged observation, methodological triangulation, data triangulation, peer debriefing and reflection by the researcher on the researcher to work towards accurate and credible observation (Glasser and Strauss, 1967; Greenlee and Lantz, 1993; Lantz, 1987, 2002). This form of study can identify natural healing dynamics, treatment activities, and treatment methods that are particularly helpful to a specific client population and can be utilized by the existential psychotherapist to identify intervention possibilities for use during the individualizing and tailoring component of the treatment process (Kondrat, 1992; Lantz, 2000, 2002). Such studies are sometimes described as phenomenological and/or Heuristic Research Studies (Moustakas, 1990).

A FEW FINAL NOTES

Existential psychotherapy is a treatment orientation that respects and values the complexities and depths of human life and of the treatment process. In existential psychotherapy the concepts of freedom, the uniqueness of every human being and the need to tailor treatment in a way that respects the individuality

and freedom of the client turns the process of psychotherapy research into a very difficult affair. In this article, the use of the classical experimental practice research has been challenged from an existential point of view and the existential “report of participation” has been outlined as an alternative research approach. Specific participation report methods discussed in this article include the case story method, case transcripts, single subject case designs, before-after field studies and grounded theory research methods.

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