

From Abstract to Practical: Fostering Student Engagement with Existential Theory

Noelany Pelc, Ph.D.

Department of Psychological Science and Counseling
3200 Cold Spring Road, Indianapolis IN 46222

Theories of Personality: PSY 335

Background: Theories of Personality is an upper-level course focusing on the study of major theoretical paradigms of personality, including psychoanalytic, trait, biological, learning-cognitive and humanistic models. Students examine human commonalities and differences, as well as hereditary and experiential influences on emotion, cognition and behavior.

Challenge: Existential theory is often one of the most challenging paradigms for students to operationalize, as it is rooted in philosophy and contrasts heavily with previous units focusing on biological, neurological, trait, and psychodynamic theories that are covered in more depth in high school and pre-requisite courses.

Class Composition: Majority pre-health students (e.g., nursing, pre-med, counseling, physical therapy) seeking to work in applied settings.

Goal: This module was designed to facilitate an exploration of Existential theory in personal and professional settings.

Theoretical Framework

Framing of Existential theory: A response to dehumanization and recent innovations leading to industrialization, isolation, and re-defining of human meaning (Kierkegaard, 1843; Nietzsche, 1870).

« Psychological distress issues *not only* from our biological genetic substrate (a psycho-pharmacologic model), *not only* from our struggle with suppressed instinctual strivings (a Freudian position), *not only* from our internalized significant adults who may be uncaring, unloving, neurotic (an object relations position), *not only* from disordered forms of thinking (a cognitive-behavioral position), *not only* from shards of forgotten traumatic memories, nor from current life crises involving one's career and relationship with significant others, *but also-but also*-from a confrontation with our existence »

(Yalom, 2008, p.180)

Four Ultimate Concerns:

- Freedom
- Isolation
- Meaning
- Mortality

Key questions:

- What is the nature of existence?
- How does it feel to exist?
- What does it mean to exist?

Sequence of Theories:

- 1) Introduction to Personality
- 2) Personality Assessment
- 3) Trait Theories
- 4) Biological Perspectives
- 5) Evolutionary Perspectives
- 6) Psychodynamic Perspectives
- 7) Neo-Psychodynamic Perspectives
- 8) **Existential and Humanistic Perspectives**
- 9) Cultural Perspectives
- 10) Cognitive/Experiential Perspectives
- 11) Stress and Coping

Figure 1. Sequence of theories introduced in course.

Activity Sequence and Prompts

Day 1: Active Large Group Experimentation

- Framework- Constructionism and phenomenology
- “Guidelines for engagement”
- Inclusivity, self-selection, privacy, and levels of participation

Activity Set-Up: Students are asked to create large discussion circle and provided with “Guidelines for Engagement” with verbal buy-in. Students are asked a series of questions that focus on: 1) intrapersonal; 2) interpersonal; 3) existential themes, in sequence.

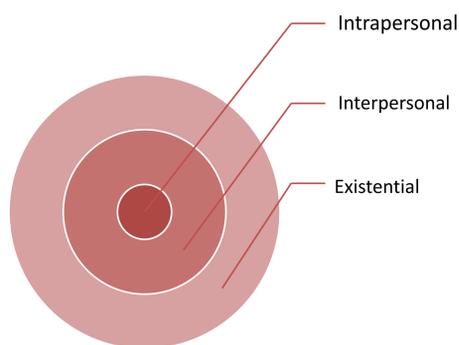


Figure 2. Diagram of nested themes.

Sample questions:

- How are you feeling right now?
- What is important to you?
- How might others describe you?
- What do others miss when they see you?
- What does society say about you? (positive and negative)
- What do you think your purpose in life is?
- When do you feel like you are most connected to your purpose?

Activity Engagement: Students are given 7-8 slips of brightly colored paper and instructed to write their responses to the questions posed (see note about self-selection and levels of participation). They're instructed to crumple their slips, toss them to the middle and retrieve one. Invited to read slips to the group or offer their own reactions. The procedure is repeated 7-8 rounds with facilitated discussion during each cycle.

Themes around freedom, isolation, meaning and mortality are annotated.

Group Process: Group is engaged in themes that link narratives, common experiences and sense of connection to each other.

Inclusivity, self-selection, privacy and levels of participation: Student slips are anonymous, can write/share only what feels comfortable, and have choice as to whether they read slips or share reactions. Many students indicate that they prefer to process internally, which is supported. Minimum of 10 students recommended to prevent identification.

Day 2: Examine Content

- Existential theoretical tenets and core theorists
- Rogerian stance and person-centered attending skills
- Eastern perspectives, First Nations perspectives, and systemic barriers

Foundational Content: Provided via PowerPoint, video clips, and framed within historical contexts and movements, while exploring bias.



Figure 3. Diagram of humanistic/existential skills that can be used across fields.

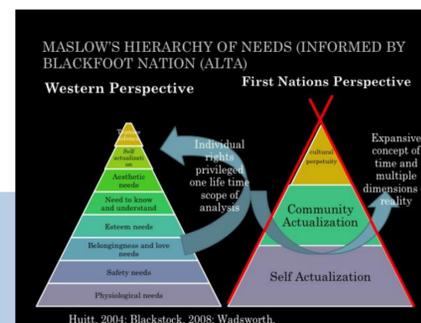


Figure 4. First Nations perspective of commonly-taught hierarchy of needs in Western psychology.

Day 3: Application and Case Study

- Spectrum of experiences: mortality, fear, isolation, joy, awe, freedom, autonomy and responsibility
- Case study application and links to health professions
- Cross cultural perspectives
- Self-reflection

Class Case Study and Small Group Work: Students are provided are shown “What Really Matters at the End of Life,” (TED, 2015) which is a TED talk by a palliative physician discussing themes of health, mortality, compassion, empathy, and the human experience. Small groups complete a handout framing existential themes within the healthcare setting and prompting personal reflection

(See Figures 5 & 6).

Figure 5. Screenshot of TED Talk shown.



Existential Theory Application Group Tasks	
Instructions: View the TedTalk clip. Using the Existential reference sheet below, answer the subsequent application questions in your small groups.	
View of humans and nature	Process is to learn what it is to be human. Must resolve the 4 ultimate concerns: freedom, isolation, meaning, and death.
Main theoretical view	Humans search for meaning and must wrestle with existential themes.
What fosters psychopathology?	Avoidance of existential concerns and inauthenticity
Key general concepts	Reality is constructed Self-actualization Freedom, isolation, meaning/purpose, and death Responsibility Hierarchy of needs (some level not met) Confrontation with mortality
Goal of theory	Increase self-awareness, increase growth potential, take responsibility and action. Facilitate genuineness and work toward meaning.
Therapy factors and major interventions	Working in the here and now (immediacy) Empathy Genuineness Cultivate joy and presence
Therapist stance	Fellow travelers, transparency, and use of self.
Begin theoretical conceptualization-	
1) Which of the 4 ultimate concerns do you hear in his narrative? Offer examples.	
2) What major life event occurred that shifted his view on life and health, from an existential perspective?	
3) How do you hear the themes of purpose and meaning in his life?	
4) In his physician role, how does he embody the therapist stance and therapy factors? How does he also function as a fellow traveler, in his work?	
5) How do you hear joy and presence discussed in his narrative, within an existential/positive psychology framework?	
6) In what ways do you see connections to your own life (consider your choice of career, themes of freedom/responsibility, isolation, choice, and barriers to connection)?	

Figure 6. Screenshot of hand-out provided.

Figure 7. Screenshot of Hazda Tribe member interview.

Themes are contrasted and compared with a brief documentary around cultural differences in meaning, purpose, and joy for a remote tribe (Fearless and Far, 2021; Figure 7).



Feedback, Outcomes, and Future Directions

Outcomes: Students generate links to other helping coursework, integrate co-curricular themes of dignity of the individual, social justice, empathy and compassion (Franciscan Values), students indicate using person-centered attending skills and feel more comfortable addressing existential themes.

Student-reported scores over 7 semesters (n= ~210 students): 1-5 (1 indicating not effective or engaging, 5 indicating highly effective and engaging) (m= 4.93).

Modifications: Over last 6 years, modified activity to provide greater privacy (e.g., slips vs responding out loud), engaged the whole group (vs 1 student volunteer at a time), and included a health-related focus to facilitate career application for class composition.

References: Available on supplemental handout.