

Existential Psychotherapy: An International Survey of the Key Authors and Texts Influencing Practice

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Existential psychotherapy is one of the longest-established forms of psychotherapy, dating back to the 1920s (Besora 1994; Cooper 2012; Straus 1959). In 1991, 3 % of American Psychological Association (APA) Division 29 psychologists identified existential psychotherapy as their main theoretical orientation (Norcross et al. 1993). In recent years, it has been claimed that the approach is growing (Barnett and Madison 2012; Cooper 2012; Deurzen 2012; Deurzen and Young 2009; Groth 1999, 2000; Schneider 2008a), and recent research indicates it is now spread across 48 countries in six continents (Correia et al. 2014).

But what is existential psychotherapy and what are its principal practices? Over the years, several attempts have been made to give existential psychotherapy a coherent conceptual framework (e.g., Boss 1963, 1979; Deurzen 2010; Frankl 1969; Schneider and Krug 2010) and, more recently, a rationale for an existential practice (e.g., Deurzen and Adams 2011; Längle 2013; Schneider 2008b; Spinelli 2007). Despite these efforts, authors show different (and sometimes opposing) perspectives on what existential psychotherapy is (Cooper 2003; Keshen 2006), and

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a definitive conceptual framework has yet to be established (Cooper 2012; Mahrer and Boulet 2004).

To a great extent, this diversity of perspectives is consistent with the core epistemological principles of existential philosophy, which strives to acknowledge the ambiguity and uncertainty of existence (Spinelli 2007). Congruent with their theoretical background, existential therapists tend to be sceptical and averse to any attempts to standardize theory or practice (Cooper 2012). But without a clear definition of what existential therapy is and what could be recognized as its core practices, it may be difficult to develop programs of research (Mahrer and Boulet 2004), evidence for effectiveness, and to clarify its place among other psychotherapeutic orientations.

Norcross (1987) attempted to establish a common theoretical framework for existential psychotherapy by analysing 80 publications. Eight unifying theoretical themes emerged from these texts: ontology, intentionality, freedom, choice/responsibility, phenomenology, individuality, authenticity, and potentiality. However, Norcross did not make explicit the methodology used for his content analysis (described as “informal”) nor the rationale for his choice of texts, leaving doubts as to how far these data were representative of 1980s existential therapy.

New research, therefore, needs to be undertaken to help develop a theoretical framework for existential psychotherapy, and to find out its common core practices. To assure rigor, a valuable first step is to identify the authors and texts that are considered, by existential therapists, to be most influential on their practice. This can then serve as the basis for extracting understandings and competences that may allow for a clearer definition of existential therapeutic work.

In terms of the authors and texts identified in previous literature, in 1970, Keen presented as suggested readings in existential psychology Bugental’s *The Search for Authenticity*, van Kaam’s *Existential Foundations of Psychology*, van den Berg’s *The Phenomenological Approach to Psychiatry* and May, Angel and Ellenberger’s *Existence*.

Besora (1994), in his article about the historic development of existential psychotherapies, presented the “most representative authors” (pp. 15–16) of each of the 11 existential psychotherapy “systems” that he found. According to Besora, the most representative authors for German daseinsanalysis are Binswanger, Boss, Kuhn and Storch; logotherapy’s key authors are Frankl, Caruso and Allers; for the UK anti-psychiatry movement Laing and Cooper; and, for the US’s existential clinical psychology and experiential psychotherapy, May, van Kaam, Ellenberger, Nedelman, Bugental, Gendlin, Hora, Mahrer and Yalom. Similarly, Cooper (2003) suggests that the main authors from the daseinsanalytic branch are Binswanger and Boss; Logotherapy’s is Frankl; for the existential-humanistic approach, May, Bugental, Yalom and Schneider; and Laing is identified as preceding the British School of Existential Analysis, whose main authors are van Deurzen, Spinelli and Cohn.

Angerami-Camon (2007) considers Binswanger, Boss, van den Berg and Laing as the main authors on bringing the existential thought to the therapeutic practice and suggests some of their main books. Viktor Frankl is presented as an important author but only “tangentially touching the existential thought” (p. 105), while Rollo

May is categorically excluded from the existential paradigm for embracing psychoanalytic ideas and practices.

Truscott (2010), in an APA book about theories for a therapist, suggests as recommended readings for existential psychotherapy Cooper's *Existential Therapies*, Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, May's *Existential Psychology*, van Deurzen's *Existential Counselling & Psychotherapy in Practice* and Yalom's *Existential Psychotherapy*. As illustrative case studies he recommends Bugental's *Intimate Journeys*, du Plock's *Case Studies in Existential Psychotherapy and Counselling*, Schneider and May's *The Psychology of Existence* and Yalom's *Love's Executioner*.

From this brief review, it is clear that different authors, from different times, geographies and different conceptual backgrounds, have given different suggestions for the most important or representative authors and texts in the existential psychotherapy field. None of these suggested lists, however, have been developed from an empirical basis. Thus, these data cannot stand as a sustainable basis for a rigorous analysis of the core encompassing concepts and practices of existential psychotherapy.

As existential therapy is a clinical discipline, the authors or texts that best represent existential therapy are the ones that are actually informing and influencing practice. The present research, therefore, is an empirical inquiry with existential practitioners on the authors and texts that they consider most to have influenced their practice.

A worldwide survey was designed in order to have different geographical, cultural and ideological accounts, so data could represent an encompassing selection for different existential therapies.

Methods

Procedures

Design

This study adopts a survey design. The "online" questionnaire platform "SurveyMonkey" was used. Data were analysed using descriptive statistical procedures.

Instruments

Two list-style, open-ended questions were formulated, asking existential counselors and psychotherapists their most influential existential therapy authors and texts. These questions were, respectively, numbers seven and nine of a 10-item questionnaire. This questionnaire was designed to study the practices, influences and characteristics of existential psychotherapists around the globe. All questions were

previously tested with a sample of 23 existential therapists to identify areas for improvement.

The question about authors was “As an existential/existentially-informed counsellor or psychotherapist, which three authors on existential therapy have most influenced your practice?” Participants were asked to complete up to three open-ended answer boxes labelled: “Author 1,” “Author 2,” and “Author 3.”

The question about texts was “As an existential/existentially-informed counsellor or psychotherapist, which three specific texts (book, book chapter, or journal article) on existential therapy have most influenced your practice?” Participants were asked to complete up to three pairs of open-ended answer boxes, labelled “Author 1/Text 1,” “Author 2/Text 2,” “Author3/Text 3.”

The questionnaire design, structure and implementation procedures were developed taking into account the investigations held by Dillman and colleagues about surveys’ development and application (Dillman et al. 2009). To increase the response rate (Dillman et al. 2009; Millar and Dillman 2011) each potential participant received an initial “invitation email,” followed by two “reminder emails,” nine and 23 days after the first email. These emails contained a link which directed the interested participant directly to the online survey. The questionnaire was available in three different languages (English, Spanish and Portuguese) and application took place between March 5 and July 20, 2012—for full questionnaire design and procedures see Correia et al. (2014).

Analysis

Responses were downloaded from SurveyMonkey to an SPSS database, where data codification and statistical descriptive analysis were conducted.

Participants’ responses to authors and texts questions had been written in different languages and with many different spellings and terminology for authors and books. To make statistical analysis possible, each response was first scrutinised, translated into a standard author or text name, and then codified into a numeric code. In this process of standardization, authors and texts responses were checked by an Internet search on Google, Google Scholar, Amazon and/or BookFinder, to identify and confirm its existence or its translation. In nine out of 3108 responses to the authors’ question it was not possible to identify the author and these were codified as “Others.” For the texts question, it was not possible to identify 155 responses due to insufficient, unidentified or unsuitable information, and these were codified as “missing values.”

Sampling Procedures

Participants were recruited by email. Contacts were made either directly: to email contacts gathered from an extensive internet search of existential practitioners (counsellors or psychotherapists); or indirectly: through the 40 existential therapy

institutions (societies and/or training centres) from all over the world who agreed to forward the invitation email to its members and/or students/trainees. This was on the basis of a systematic online search of existential institutions around the globe that had been conducted previously (see Correia et al. 2014).

Participants

A total of 572 counsellors or psychotherapists were contacted directly, and 5109 invitations were sent out through the 26 institutions that had provided forwarding e-mails. It was not possible to accurately calculate the survey response rate, as 14 (35 %) institutions did not provide information about the number of members that they had contacted.

A total of 1382 participants from all over the world accessed the questionnaire and 1358 gave their informed consent. The number of participants who considered their therapeutic practice as existential or primarily informed by existential ideas and practices was 1264.

A total of 1085 participants, from 48 different countries, gave at least one influential author for their existential practice; and 853, from 45 countries, gave at least one influential text.

Participants who responded to the two questions analysed in this paper were counsellors, psychotherapists or trainees in counselling or psychotherapy. In total, 53.9 % of respondents to the authors' question, and 55.5 % of the respondents to the text question, considered their practice as "existential." The remaining respondents considered their practice "primarily informed by existential ideas or practices" (see Table 1).

More than 90 % of respondents had, or were having, specific institutional training as an existential/existentially-informed counsellor or psychotherapist and around 40 % were in training by the time they filled in the questionnaire (see Table 1). The more experienced practitioners (>10 years of practice) constituted less than 30 %.

Wherever possible, respondents were identified with a particular branch of existential therapy. This was on the basis of their institutional existential therapy training or affiliation. Just over 50 % of the sample had trained or were members of institutions aligned with the existential-phenomenological branch of existential therapy. Slightly more than 25 % were associated with logotherapy and/or existential analysis; approximately 8 % with existential-humanistic; and less than 3 % with daseinsanalysis (see Table 1). It was not possible to associate around 10 % of respondents to any branch and less than 2 % were associated to other psychotherapeutic paradigms (e.g., Gestalt therapy, psychoanalysis).

Most participants were from Europe (51 %, both questions) or Latin America (authors: 25.8 %; texts: 27.6 %). However, responses were received from all inhabited continents (see Table 2): Africa (0.2 %, both questions), Asia (authors: 4.8 %; texts: 4.1 %), Australia (authors: 7.5 %; texts: 7.1 %) and North America

Table 1 Frequencies and percentages of participants' characteristics for both questions

Demographics	Authors		Texts	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Practice				
Existential	585	53.9	473	55.5
Existentially-informed	500	46.1	380	44.5
Institutional training				
Yes	983	90.9	782	91.9
No	99	9.1	69	8.1
Currently student				
Yes	424	39.1	341	40.0
No	661	60.9	512	60.0
Years of practice				
<10 years	769	71.4	598	70.7
>10 years	308	28.6	248	29.3
Branch				
Daseinsanalysis	26	2.4	26	3.0
Existential-humanistic	79	7.3	69	8.1
Existential-phenomenological	551	50.8	454	53.2
Logotherapy	290	26.7	216	25.3
Other	19	1.8	9	1.1
None attributed	120	11.1	79	9.3
Total	1085	–	853	–

(authors: 9.8 %; texts: 9.9 %). These percentages of participants by continent are in line with the percentages of existential therapy institutions by continent (see Correia et al. 2014); this may indicate good sample representativeness by continent.

The United Kingdom was the best represented country, constituting slightly more than 21 % of the authors and texts total answers (see Table 2). Next came Brazil (authors: 15.8 %; texts: 17.1 %), Austria (authors: 13.6 %; texts: 12.2 %), the United States (authors: 8.9 %; texts: 8.8 %), Australia (authors: 7.4 %; texts: 6.9 %) and Mexico (authors: 4.8 %; texts: 4.7 %), all of them with more than 40 practitioners, who gave their account of the most influential authors and texts for their existential practice. There were 15 countries with 10 or more existential practitioners answering both questions.

Reflexive Statement

The first two authors are existential psychotherapists and the third author is a Gestalt psychotherapist. This research was conducted to develop a deeper understanding of the influences on, and nature of, existential therapeutic practice and to

Table 2 Frequencies and percentages of participants by continent and country (the 15 most representative)

Continents Countries	Authors		Texts	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Africa	2	0.2	2	0.2
Asia	52	4.8	35	4.1
Israel	30	2.8	21	2.5
China	15	1.4	10	1.2
Australia	81	7.5	60	7.1
Australia	80	7.4	59	6.9
Europe	557	51.3	434	51.1
United Kingdom	227	21.1	184	21.6
Austria	147	13.6	104	12.2
Portugal	30	2.8	23	2.7
Russia	30	2.8	20	2.4
Sweden	19	1.8	14	1.6
Lithuania	16	1.5	13	1.5
Greece	14	1.3	14	1.6
Latin America	280	25.8	235	27.6
Brazil	170	15.8	145	17.1
Mexico	52	4.8	40	4.7
Argentina	28	2.6	23	2.7
Chile	16	1.5	14	1.6
North America	106	9.8	84	9.9
United States	96	8.9	75	8.8
TOTAL	1,085	---	853	---

try to develop greater transparency in the existential psychotherapy field. Although the second author is a writer on existential therapy and closely associated with the “British School,” we were not aware of holding any assumptions or biases as to who might be identified as the most influential authors and texts in this field.

Results

Authors Influencing Practice

A total of 1085 participants gave 3108 responses. This amounts to a mean of 2.86 choices per respondent. There were 221 different authors reported as the most influential for the respondent’s existential practice.

Table 3 Frequencies and percentages of the 20 most influential existential therapy authors and the amount of times their texts were chosen as the most influential to participants' existential practice

Authors	Participants direct choice		Amount of times their texts were chosen	
	<i>n</i>	% within therapy authors	<i>n</i>	% within therapy texts
Frankl, Viktor	395	16.6	352	18.3
Yalom, Irvin	369	15.5	308	16.0
Spinelli, Ernesto	251	10.6	178	9.3
Deurzen, Emmy van	238	10.0	166	8.6
Längle, Alfried	206	8.7	163	8.5
May, Rollo	139	5.9	90	4.7
Bugental, James	57	2.4	53	2.8
Laing, Ronald	57	2.4	46	2.4
Boss, Medard	50	2.1	41	2.1
Lukas, Elisabeth	49	2.1	17	0.9
Cohn, Hans	47	2.0	40	2.1
Rogers, Carl	37	1.6	26	1.4
Binswanger, Ludwig	31	1.3	16	0.8
Cooper, Mick	23	1.0	26	1.4
Schneider, Kirk	21	0.9	24	1.2
Strasser, Freddie	20	0.8	23	1.2
Feijoo, Ana Maria	15	0.6	23	1.2
Tutsch, Lilo	14	0.6	1	0.1
Strasser, Alison	12	0.5	1	0.1
Robles, Yaqui	12	0.5	19	1.0

In 733 (23.6 %) responses, participants cited 53 existential philosophers or other non-therapy related figures. The seven most common being Heidegger ($n = 223$, 30.4 % within philosophers), Sartre ($n = 143$, 19.5 %), Kierkegaard ($n = 87$, 11.9 %), Buber ($n = 53$, 7.2 %), Nietzsche ($n = 41$, 5.6 %), Merleau-Ponty ($n = 38$, 5.2 %), and Husserl ($n = 36$, 4.9 %). As the question had specifically requested authors “on existential therapy,” these responses were removed from further analysis.

The 168 remaining authors (psychologists, psychiatrists and/or psychotherapists) were cited between one and 395 times. Only 33 of the authors were cited six or more times. The six most influential authors were Frankl ($n = 395$, 16.6 % of all author citations), Yalom ($n = 369$, 15.5 %), Spinelli ($n = 251$, 10.6 %), van Deurzen ($n = 238$, 10 %), Längle ($n = 206$, 8.7 %), and May ($n = 139$, 5.9 %) (see Table 3).

Texts Influencing Practice

In total, the 853 participants cited 2415 identified texts. This amounts to a mean of 2.83 choices per respondent. A total of 467 different texts from 227 authors were reported by participants as the most influential on their existential practice.

Table 4 Frequencies and percentages of the 20 most influential existential therapy texts

Texts	<i>n</i>	% within therapy texts
Frankl, V. <i>Man's Search for Meaning</i>	180	9.4
Yalom, I. <i>Existential Psychotherapy</i>	176	9.2
Spinelli, E. <i>Practising Existential Psychotherapy</i>	67	3.5
Frankl, V. <i>The Doctor and the Soul</i>	67	3.5
Deurzen, E. van <i>Everyday Mysteries</i>	66	3.4
Deurzen, E. van <i>Existential Counselling & Psychotherapy in Practice</i>	62	3.2
Spinelli, E. <i>The Interpreted World</i>	51	2.7
Yalom, I. <i>The Gift of Therapy</i>	50	2.6
Yalom, I. <i>Love's Executioner</i>	38	2.0
Längle, A. <i>Sinnvoll Leben</i>	36	1.9
Laing, R. <i>The Divided Self</i>	29	1.5
Längle, A. <i>Lehrbuch zur Existenzanalyse</i>	27	1.4
Spinelli, E. <i>Demystifying Therapy</i>	27	1.4
Cohn, H. <i>Existential Thought and Therapeutic Practice</i>	27	1.4
Cooper, M. <i>Existential Therapies</i>	24	1.2
May, R., Angel, E., and Ellenberger, H. <i>Existence</i>	21	1.1
Spinelli, E. <i>Tales of Unknowing</i>	20	1.0
Bugental, J. <i>The Art of the Psychotherapist</i>	19	1.0
Frankl, V. <i>Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning</i>	19	1.0
Längle, A., Holzhey-Kunz, A. <i>Existenzanalyse und Daseinsanalyse</i>	18	0.9

In 492 (20.4 %) cases, respondents cited existential philosophy texts or other non-therapy related texts. The seven most common were Heidegger's *Being and Time* ($n = 135$, 27.4 % within non-therapy related texts), Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* ($n = 67$, 13.6 %), Buber's *I and Thou* ($n = 35$, 7.1 %), Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism* ($n = 20$, 4.1 %), Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* ($n = 17$, 3.5 %) and two of Kierkegaard's books, *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Sickness Unto Death* ($n = 15$ for each, 3 %).

The remaining 1923 texts were cited between one and 180 times. There were 62 texts chosen six or more times by the respondents. Two books were cited substantially more than any others (see Table 4): Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* ($n = 180$, 9.4 %) and Yalom's *Existential Psychotherapy* ($n = 176$, 9.2 %). The next most influential texts were Spinelli's *Practising Existential Psychotherapy* and Frankl's *The Doctor and the Soul* ($n = 67$, 3.5 %), followed by van Deurzen's *Everyday Mysteries* ($n = 66$, 3.4 %) and *Existential Counselling & Psychotherapy in Practice* ($n = 62$, 3.2 %).

Discussion

In terms of the authors most influential to existential practice, a high level of triangulation was found between those directly identified and those who had written the most influential existential texts. As can be seen in Table 3, Frankl's texts were chosen 352 times (18.3 %) as the most influential, followed by Yalom's 308 (16 %), Spinelli's 178 (9.3 %), van Deurzen's 166 (8.6 %) and Längle's 163 (8.5 %) times.

When asked about the authors and texts that most influenced their practice, existential counsellors and psychotherapists chose Viktor Frankl and Irvin Yalom and, respectively, their books *Man's Search for Meaning* and *Existential Psychotherapy*. Two authors (Spinelli and van Deurzen) from the recent British School (Cooper 2003, 2012) come next in popularity, their books being the 3rd, 5th, 6th and 7th most influential, corroborating Miles Groth's (2000) statement about the importance of this existential school for contemporary existential psychotherapy. Längle and his texts also showed considerable influence, mainly among logotherapy and existential analysis practitioners, while May maintains his status as a key influence in the existential psychotherapy world.

Although it was specifically asked for authors and texts "on existential therapy," slightly more than 20 % of responses reported philosophical or other non-therapy related authors. This number of responses may indicate the considerable and direct influence that existential philosophy has on the actual practice and in its theoretical framework. Here, Heidegger's *Being and Time* was overwhelmingly identified as the most influential text.

When compared with the literature review concerning the most important or representative authors and texts, these data corroborate some consensus around Frankl and Yalom (Cooper 2003; Jacobsen 2007; Truscott 2010) and gives strength to the more recent lists where authors and texts from the British School tend to appear (Cooper 2003; Jacobsen 2007; Truscott 2010).

Boss and Binswanger were also identified in the review (Angerami-Camon 2007; Besora 1994; Cooper 2003; Jacobsen 2007), but were only the 9th and 13th most influential authors for existential practitioners, respectively. This could have two main explanations: (a) These authors are associated with the daseinsanalytic branch, and its worldwide representation, as reflected in the sample, is very small currently (Correia et al. 2014); (b) The historical relevance of these figures may influence the reviewed authors' choice, but these authors may not have the equivalent weight to influence the contemporary practitioner's practice.

If this last explanation is correct (and the same phenomena happened with van Kaam and van den Berg), then a choice of authors and texts made by a study of the most cited authors and texts in the bibliographic references will probably end up with a different list of the most influential. Historical and academically influential authors and texts, present on bibliographical references, may not always correspond to the ones that most influence practitioners' current conceptual and practical framework. If the aim is to study the practical and clinical sides of existential

therapy, then data collected from actual practitioners may give us a more representative pool of texts and authors.

Limitations

Data concern practitioners' *self-reported* perceived influence upon their own practice, and it may be that the *actual* authors and texts that influence their practice are different. Results also aim to reflect the main influences upon *contemporary* existential practitioners' practice and it cannot be assumed to be representative of the most influential authors and texts for the historical, conceptual and clinical development of existential psychology, psychiatry and psychotherapy.

Another important limitation is that those who responded to the questionnaire may not be representative of the actual global population of existential counsellors and psychotherapists. Not only because the option for an online questionnaire may have excluded existential psychotherapists without access to this technology, but also due to language constraints, as this research was biased towards English, Spanish and Portuguese speakers.

Percentages of participants by continent are in line with the percentages of existential therapy institutions by continent (see Correia et al. 2014), but there were no previous studies about the actual distribution of existential therapists worldwide. As a result, no guarantees can be given about the representativeness of this sample either by continent, country or by branch of existential psychotherapy.

Implications for Practice

Despite the limitations, this study gives the first empirically-based understanding of the authors and texts that are most influential on the work of existential therapists around the globe. There is now available evidence of who and which texts are informing existential practitioners' practice. This helps to develop an understanding of the nature of existential therapy, and also sets a basis for future analysis of the conceptual and practical frameworks of contemporary existential practice.

Training institutes, practitioners or trainees interested in deepening their knowledge of existential practice now have a basis for the main references being used by today's existential practitioners worldwide.

Längle is ranked as one of the most influential authors, but his books are currently only in German. This suggests there is a need to translate more of these texts into English and other languages.

Further Research

Recent developments within existential therapy could eventually dictate rapid changes to this list. Future studies of the most influential authors and texts may indicate the impact of contemporary developments within existential psychotherapy.

Existential philosophy's great influence upon existential practitioners' practice, revealed in this study, raises several interesting and intriguing research questions: How do existential therapists translate a philosophical/theoretical thought into a practical intervention? What practices are these? And what is the therapeutic impact of the approach and benefit for the client? Further inquiry should also be made into the philosophical authors and texts that most influence existential practice.

Conclusion

This pool of existential therapy's authors and texts stems from more than 850 respondents worldwide who identify their practice as existential or primarily informed by this paradigm. An empirical base of the most influential authors and texts upon contemporary existential practice is now available for future literature/bibliographic research on existential psychotherapy. This kind of research may help us to deepen the understanding of the similarities and differences between the most influential perspectives and to clarify existential therapies' common theoretical and practical grounds.

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