

# **Experimental Existential Psychology: Exploring the Human**

## **Confrontation with Reality**

Tom Pyszczynski  
University of Colorado

Jeff Greenberg  
University of Arizona

Sander L. Koole  
Free University Amsterdam

Draft: November 13, 2003

In: J. Greenberg, S. L., Koole, and T. Pyszczynski (Eds.), *Handbook of experimental existential psychology*. New York: Guilford.

## What is Experimental Existential Psychology?

When we look for answers to the questions we have been discussing, we find, curiously enough, that every answer seems to somehow impoverish the problem. Every answer sells us short; it does not do justice to the depth of the question but transforms it from a dynamic human concern into a simplistic, lifeless, inert line of words ... The only way of resolving – in contrast to solving -- the questions is to transform them by means of deeper and wider dimensions of consciousness. The problems must be embraced in their full meaning, the antimonies resolved even with their contradictions. (pp. 307-308)

The microcosm of consciousness is where the macrocosm of the universe is known. It is the fearful joy, the blessing, and the curse of man that he can be conscious of himself and his world. (p. 324)

## Rollo May, Love and Will

For most of the relatively short history of scientific psychology the mere idea of an experimental existential psychology would have been considered oxymoronic – in fact such a juxtaposition of experimental and existential psychology was probably never even considered at all. Although experimental psychology has flourished for well over 100 years, and existential ideas have made their way into the theories of clinically oriented theorists and therapists for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these two approaches have traditionally been thought of as opposite ends of the very broad and typically finely

demarcated field of psychology. Experimental psychologists applied rigorous research methods to relatively simple phenomena, usually with the intention of discovering the most basic building blocks of human behavior. Existential psychologists, on the other hand, speculated about the human confrontation with very abstract questions regarding the nature of existence and the meaning of life – ideas that typically are considered far too abstruse and intractable to be fruitfully addressed by the scientific method. For the most part, experimentalists and existentialists acknowledged the existence of each other only when pointing to the fundamental absurdity of what the other was trying to accomplish. Indeed, Irvin Yalom, a prominent existential psychotherapist whose work has been a major source of inspiration for our attempts to develop an experimental existential psychology, commented that in psychological research, “the precision of the result is directly proportional to the triviality of the variables studied. A strange type of science!” (1980, p. 24).

Yalom’s critical comments were written in the later 1970’s, which was precisely when the two more senior authors of this chapter were engaged in doctoral study in social psychology. Although Yalom was commenting on the state of affairs in the field of psychotherapy research, we had very similar feelings about the work that was then dominating the study of social psychology. The “cognitive revolution” had captured the imagination of most of the field, and a movement was afoot to explain virtually all human behavior as resulting from the basically rational but sometimes biased workings of the “human information processing system.” The motivational theorizing that had flourished through most of the history of social psychology was being replaced by analyses that attempted to explain behavior by specifying the information processing sequences

through which external events led to inferences or conclusions, which were then assumed to rather directly determine human action. Conceptualizations of the impact of needs, desires, and emotions seemed to be rather rapidly receding from social psychological discourse, and consideration of how people come to grips with the really big issues in life was virtually non-existent. Like Yalom, we felt disenchanted and had the sense that something very basic and important was missing from the social psychological thinking of the time. As Rollo May (1954, p. xx) observed, the field of psychology seemed intent on making “molehills out of mountains.”

Certainly we are not suggesting that cognitive analyses are unimportant, uninformative, or unnecessary for a comprehensive and well-rounded psychology. Just as all behavior has physiological and bio-chemical underpinnings, so too is cognitive activity of some sort involved in virtually everything people do. But the social cognitivists’ attempt to explain human behavior by relying solely on information processing analyses was just as short-sighted as the behaviorists’ attempt to deny the importance of higher level cognitive processes in human functioning. Important pieces of the human puzzle were being systematically left out of psychology’s explanations for why people do the things they do. Just as the behaviorists had rejected internal cognitive processes from their explanations because such processes could not be directly observed, most other experimental psychologists continued to ignore the impact of existential issues because they seemed beyond the realm of empirical research. In the years since then, the incompleteness of a purely cognitive approach has been recognized by theorists in virtually all areas of psychology. The content of psychological journals has changed

radically over the last 20 years or so, and current theorizing incorporates a wider range of influences than ever, with a growing emphasis on broad integrative theorizing.

Yes, a lot has changed in psychology over the past few decades. Somewhat ironically, many of these changes were inspired by the hard-core social cognitive paradigm that dominated the field of social psychology from the mid 1970's through the late 1980's. Cognitive psychology provided psychologists of all stripes with a new set of conceptual tools to think about the workings of the mind. Furthermore, cognitive psychology provided a wide range of new research methods and technologies to enable us to assess and indirectly observe mental processes that had for decades been assumed to be hidden from view and thus beyond the realm of scientific analysis. The old behaviorist doctrine that mental events could not be studied scientifically because they could not be observed had disintegrated in response to the advances coming out of cognitive laboratories. Just as importantly, we believe, the massive popularity of purely cognitive explanations for human behavior, and the resulting sense that something very important was being left out of mainstream theorizing, provided an additional impetus to spur theorists to bring look back to the classic psychological theories and bring motivational, emotional, unconscious, and psychodynamic processes back into their analyses. Theories of the self have flourished and out of this renewed interest in the abstract sense of identity, meaning, value, and purpose that the study of the self required, a trend toward consideration of existential issues in modern psychological theorizing and research has gradually emerged. This growing trend led to the First International Conference on Experimental Existential Psychology in August, 2001 in Amsterdam. This *Handbook* was inspired by the success of that conference and hopefully serves as a

worthy representation of what are currently the best, most mature contemporary psychological theories and research programs addressing existential questions.

*What is Existentialism?*

Philosopher William Barrett (1965, p. 126) defined existentialism as “a philosophy that confronts the human situation *in its totality* to ask what the basic conditions of human existence are and how man can establish his own meaning out of these conditions.” Existential thinking is both old and new. One of the oldest known written documents, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, recounts the existential crisis brought on in the protagonist by the death of his friend, Enkidu:

Now what sleep is this that has taken hold of thee? Thou has become dark and canst not hear me. When I die shall I not be like unto Enkidu? Sorrow enters my heart, I am afraid of death (pp. 63-64).

Consideration of existential issues can also be found in the work of the great thinkers of the Western classic era, such as Homer, Plato, Socrates, and Seneca, and continued through the work of theologians like Augustine and Aquinas. Existential issues were also explored in the blossoming arts and humanities of the European Renaissance, for example by writers such as Cervantes, Dante, Milton, Shakespeare, and Swift. These arts became even more focused on these matters in the romantic period of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example in the poetry of Byron, Shelley, and Keats, the novels of Balzac, Dostoyevsky, Hugo, and Tolstoy, and the music of Beethoven, Brahms, Bruckner, and Tchiakowsky. And of course, this issue has become even more dominant in art since then, as, for example, can be seen in the plays of Beckett, O’Neill, and Ionesco, the classical music of

Mahler and Cage, the rock music of John Lennon and The Doors, and the surrealist paintings of Dahli, Ernst, Tanguy, and many others. One could even say that virtually everyone who is widely considered a “great artist” explored existential issues in his or her work in one form or another. Indeed, it may be the expression of deep existential concerns that is the underlying commonality of all artistic creation.

An explicit, focused consideration of existential issues came to full fruition of course in the Existentialist school of philosophy, which built upon the philosophical line of thought of Descartes, Kant and Hegel and emerged out of the writings of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Marcel, Camus, Jaspers, Unamuno, Gasset, Buber, Tillich, and others. Although approaching existential questions from very diverse perspectives and sometimes drawing dramatically different conclusions, all of these thinkers addressed the questions of what it means to be a human being, how we humans relate to the physical and metaphysical world that surrounds us, what is life and death, and what it all means. Most importantly, they considered the implications of how ordinary humans struggle with these questions for what happens in their daily lives. Thus, existential issues were not conceived of as material for the abstruse musings of philosophers and intellectuals but, rather, as pressing issues with enormous impact on the lives of us all.

### *The Tradition of Existential Psychology*

Within the field of psychology, a loosely defined existentialist movement began to emerge, initially as a reaction to orthodox Freudian theory. In Europe, theorists such as Ludwig Binswanger, Melard Boss, and Viktor Frankl argued for the importance of basing our analyses of human behavior in the phenomenological world of the subject. As Binswanger put it, “There is not one space and time only, but as many spaces and times

as there are subjects.” (1956, p. 196). Otto Rank was perhaps the first theorist to incorporate existentialist concepts into a broad theoretical conception of human behavior, with his theorizing of the role of the twin fears of life and death in the development of the self in the child and the ongoing influence of these forces across the lifespan. Indeed, Rank’s work anticipated many of the themes to be found in later existential psychological work, in his analysis of art and creativity, the soul, the fears of life and death, and the will. Similar existentialist leanings can be found in Karen Horney’s emphasis on our conception of the future as a critical determinant of behavior, in Erich Fromm’s analysis of the pursuit and avoidance of freedom, Carl Rogers emphasis on authenticity, and Abraham Maslow’s thinking regarding self-actualization, and more recently in the writings of R.D. Laing, Ernest Becker, Robert Jay Lifton, and Irvin Yalom.

In his classic text on existential psychotherapy, Irvin Yalom (1980) described existential thought as focused on human confrontation with the fundamentals of existence. He viewed existential psychology as rooted in Freudian psychodynamics, in the sense that it explored the motivational consequences of important human conflicts, but argued that the fundamental conflicts of concern to existentialists are very different from those emphasized by Freud: “neither a conflict with suppressed instinctual strivings nor one with internalized significant adults, but *instead a conflict that flows from the individual’s confrontation with the givens of existence*” (Yalom, 1980, p. 8, emphasis in original). In other words, existential thought attempts to explain how ordinary humans come to terms with the basic facts of life and reality with which we all must contend. But what are these basic “givens of existence”?



Yalom delineated four basic concerns that he believes exert enormous influences on all people's lives: death, freedom, existential isolation, and meaninglessness. These are deep, potentially terrifying issues, and consequently, people often avoid direct confrontation with them. Indeed, many people claim that they *never* think about such things. Nonetheless, Yalom argued that these basic concerns are ubiquitous and influential regardless of whether we realize it or not. The inevitability of death is a simple fact of life of which we are all aware; the inevitability of death in an animal that desperately wants to live produces a conflict that simply cannot be brushed aside. The concern with freedom reflects the conflict between a desire for self-determination and the sense of groundlessness and ambiguity that results when one realizes that much of what happens in one's life is really up to oneself – that there are few if any absolute rules to live by. By existential isolation, Yalom is referring to, “a fundamental isolation ... from both creatures and world ... No matter how close each of us becomes to another, there remains a final, unbridgeable gap; each of us enters existence alone and must depart from it alone” (1980, p. 9). Existential isolation is the inevitable consequence of the very personal, subjective, and individual nature of human experience that can never be fully shared with another being. The problem of meaninglessness is the result of the first three basic concerns: In a world where the only true certainty is death, where meaning and value are subjective human creations rather than absolute truths, and where one can never fully share one's experiences with others, what meaning does life have? The very real possibility that human life is utterly devoid of meaning lurks just beneath the surface of our efforts to cling to whatever meaning we can find or create. According to Yalom, the

crisis of meaninglessness “stems from the dilemma of a meaning-seeking creature who is thrown into a universe that has no meaning (1980, p. 9).

*The Primary Themes of Experimental Existential Psychology*

Yalom considered these to be the four most basic existential issues with which people must grapple, and these issues are addressed in various ways by virtually all the authors of the chapters of this volume. However, Yalom also noted that these four by no means constituted an exhaustive list, and indeed, a wide range of additional existential concerns are also currently being actively explored by the new wave of experimental existential psychologists. Included among these are questions of how we humans fit into the physical universe, how we relate to nature, and how we come to grips with the physical nature of our own bodies, questions about beauty, spirituality, and nostalgia, and questions about the role of existential concerns in intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup conflict. Of course there are undoubtedly many other important ways in which people’s confrontations with the basic givens of human existence influence their lives, and we hope that this volume will spark interest in further exploration of such issues.

To attempt to capture the main themes of this wide-ranging work, based largely on Yalom’s big four, we have organized *The Handbook* into four sections: Existential Realities, Systems of Meaning and Value, the Human Connection, and Freedom and the Will. The Existential Realities section focuses on the psychological confrontation with death, the past, the body, and nature. The Systems of Meaning and Value section focuses on the human quest for meaning and significance, utilizing perspective such as terror management theory, lay-epistemics, uncertainty management, and systems justification in the context of examining of culture, morality, justice, and religion. The Human

Connection section highlights the interpersonal dimensions of Experimental Existential Psychology, dealing with attachment, social identity, ostracism, perspective taking, and shame and guilt as intrinsically social existential phenomena. Finally, the Freedom and the Will section explores the possibilities of human freedom, utilizing contributions from self-determination theory, automaticity research, and German will psychology.

*Experimental Existential Psychology and Modern Social Psychology*

A case could be made that, even though they may not have realized it, social psychologists have been concerned with existential issues in one way or another all along. Classic social psychological topics such as attitudes, values, morality, the impact of the group on the individual, causal attribution, decision-making and choice, cognitive dissonance, and reactance all touch upon the human attempt to find meaning in an ambiguous world and find values to orient one's life around. Fritz Heider focused his entire career on exploring the human quest to understand the causal structure of the world in which they live. This work played a major role in inspiring the cognitive revolution in social psychology and its influence continues to be felt across the field even to this day. But whereas Heider focused on the way the "man in the street" comes to understand the behavior of those around him, the existentialist focus is on how this same "man in the street" grapples, whether consciously or unconsciously, with even more basic questions about life itself.

Similarly, Leon Festinger's social comparison theory (1954) focused on how people rely on social reality to understand and evaluate themselves and his cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) explored how people grapple with the inconsistencies in their lives. Later work in the dissonance tradition by Brehm and Cohen (1962),

Aronson (19xx), Mills (19xx – can we fit him in?), and many others explored the role of free choice, responsibility, hypocrisy. Brehm's (1955) classic analysis of the dilemma that results from making choices is remarkably similar to that discussed by Fromm (1954) and other existentially oriented thinkers: the very act of choosing a given course of action limits one's freedom to pursue other courses of action, and thus sets a set of intricate conflict-reducing processes in motion. Melvin Lerner (e.g., Lerner & Simmons, 1966) inspired the empirical study of the human quest for justice and the exploration of how people respond to injustice with his seminal Just World Hypothesis and the research that followed from it. Stanley Milgram's classic studies of obedience explored the startling readiness of people to cede responsibility to authority figures and the potentially lethal consequences of such surrender of control. In a similar vein, Phil Zimbardo (19xx) explored the loss of self and control over one's actions that result from immersion in social roles and the deindividuating consequences of immersion in groups.

Perhaps the one construct that pervades all existential concerns is that of self-awareness. Ernest Becker (1962) argued that self-awareness is the most important feature that distinguishes human beings from other animals and that it is this capacity for self-awareness that sets the stage for the existential terror that led to the development of culture and humankind as we know it today. Of course, social psychologists were introduced to the notion of self-awareness by Shelley Duvall and Robert Wicklund's (1972) highly influential objective self-awareness theory. Although the experimental study of the self within social psychology, which we believe set the stage for the emergence of the experimental existential perspective, emerged from a variety of divergent and related lines of inquiry that were being explored in the early 1970's, we

believe that Duvall and Wicklund's seminal work on self-awareness was a landmark contribution that signaled the emergence of the self as a central and indispensable focus of social psychological inquiry.

In retrospect, it seems that the 1950's and 1960's were a time when social psychologists were heavily immersed in the exploration of existential issues. Indeed, we believe that it was this exciting period of intellectual fomentation that inspired many contemporary social psychologists to enter the field. We believe, however, that a more explicit acknowledgment of the importance of existential issues and the confrontation with the basic realities of human existence will add an important new dimension to the study of these classic issues. An existential perspective focuses not so much on *what* we know or *how* we know, but rather, on *that* we know. It has the potential to provide a new look, from a different perspective, at the issues that have captured psychologists' imaginations for the past century.

### *Of Our Own Making: Confinement and Liberation*

How *do* people cope with their understanding of their place in the universe? Oftentimes, this amounts to the study of how people shield themselves from their knowledge of their mortality, their uncertainty, their isolation, and the absence of meaning other than what they themselves create. Although confrontation with the fundamental dilemmas of human existence can be terrifying, can lead to a great deal of self-deception, can instigate hostility and hatred, and can undermine our freedom, it also has the potential to be inspiring and liberating and provide the impetus for a better way of being. This was the hope of many existential thinkers and the impetus for the emergence of the humanistic movement in psychology. In fact, many of those currently pursuing an

experimental existential agenda are committed to these very same ideals, of acquiring the understanding that might provide the key to a freer and more open way of being. Our hope is that by bringing existential issues back to the forefront of social psychological discourse, the present volume will reinvigorate our discipline and inspire new decades of debate and discovery.

## References

*The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament parallels.* (1946). Translated by A. Heidel.

Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.