Original Article

Examination of the Philosophical Diversity of Existential Approaches in Social Work Practice

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Abstract   The existential approaches in social work practice are thought to help social workers to understand the 'being' of humans, especially the 'suffering' of humans. The existential approaches understand clients as 'existence,' that is to say, their 'existence' revolves around a concern for themselves. But the issues each theorist of approach deals with are considerably different from each other. In other words, these approaches are too different to be grouped together, but they have been so far understood as the same category as 'existential social work.' This article clarifies the diversity of existential approaches in social work practice by examining the philosophical thoughts on which these are based, through investigating the articles. Among other things, the author of this article focuses on theorists such as Jim Lantz, David Weiss, Neil Thompson, and Donald Krill, who had systematically developed their own existential frameworks. As a result, the author finds that there are considerable differences among the four frameworks. By understanding the diversity of existential social work theories examined in this article, social workers are able to broaden the range of the interpretation of variation of 'existence (suffering)' of their clients.

Key words: existential social work, existence, suffering, philosophical diversity

I. Introduction

The existential approaches in social work practice are those which have been mainly discussed in Europe and North America. These have been thought to help us understand the essential 'being' of humans. In particular, when clients confront serious problems in their own lives, "such as an acceptance of the death of their own, their closest and most loved member of family and closest friend, an acceptance of their own illnesses and disabilities, their experience of bereavement, their acceptance of the aftereffects of a great disaster, and their experiences of alienation, isolation and discrimination, not in a gen-

eral nor an abstract way" (Murata, 2000: 202). This framework should be brought to the attention of all social workers to help them understand their clients as 'existence.'

The main existential theories come from philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre. The existential approaches understand clients as 'existence,' which means, their 'existence' revolves around a concern for themselves. From this perspective, clients are understood as individual, that is to say, the existential theories "emphasize human beings as independent entities interested in their own self (= existence), and also emphasizing their suffering in their own living process" (Nakamura, 2010: 172). But actually, there are considerable differences between the authors of the existential approaches in the issues that they deal with. In other words, the frameworks which authors have discussed have been understood in the same category as 'existential social work.'

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Despite the fact that the frameworks of these authors are similar, they cannot be grouped together. They "have proposed a more philosophical perspective rather than specific working techniques" (Krill, 2011: 179).Their basic perspectives have a commonality in terms of understanding their clients as 'existence.' But the interpretations of the 'existence' are greatly different from each other. Therefore, up to the present, the difference of philosophies among them became glaring in Europe and North America, also in our country, until now, not many but a few authors have discussed different types of existential approaches based on different theoretical bases.

In this article, the author is going to clarify the diversity of existential approaches in social work practice by examining the philosophical thoughts which these have been based on. Clients exist as 'existence,' and their 'existence' revolves around a concern for themselves. They will constantly feel anxiety about how they live their own lives, therefore they cannot escape from suffering. In the process of helping them, social workers need to establish a way to interpret their suffering. For a human, life is suffering which can take many forms. The diversity of existential social work theories, especially those focused on the suffering of clients, makes it possible for social workers to interpret the various types of suffering (living) of clients. This article focuses specifically on the following authors; Jim Lantz,[1] David Weiss,[2] Neil Thompson,[3] and Donald Krill,[4] who have over the past thirty years developed their own existential frameworks more systematically in Europe and North America, and who have clarified the differences in their own approaches, by investigating the articles and the writings which they have written. In addition,

there have been other authors who have taken different perspectives of existentialism. But until now, these people have submitted a few isolated articles. Therefore in this article, the author will analyze the frameworks of these four people who have developed their theories much more systematically.

The reason why this article focuses on the philosophies of the frameworks is because depending on the interpretation of the 'existence' of their clients, the difference among these frameworks will become clear. Therefore, it is crucial to analyze the philosophies they were based on, and this article will focus on the analysis. The author declares that this article has adhered to the ethical guidelines of society.

The following perspectives can be classified as the studies of existential social work: 1) Explaining an overview and a trend of the existential social work (Murata, 2000), (Uemura, 2005), (Koezumi, 2009), (Nakamura, 2010), and 2) discussing an original framework based on existential perspective (Yasui, 2007), (Yasui, 2009), (Owada, 2010), (Murata, 2011). The articles which studied Krill who discussed existential social work (Saiko, 1982), (Shinkawa, 1998), could also be included in the former category. However, none of the above articles had the aim of clarifying the diversity of existential social work theories like this.

II. Existential Approach by Lantz Which Focuses on the Search for Meaning

Jim Lantz based his practice on the thoughts and techniques of Logotherapy by Viktor Frankl in the support for families. Frankl provided treatment to the clients seized by an existential vacuum namely nothingness and void. Humans revolve around a concern for themselves as 'existence'. They exist in a way totally different from other animals or plants, or inorganic substances. In other words, they always search for meaning in their own lives. Therefore, they must continue to sense and feel some meaning in themselves in order to live a healthier and livelier 'existence.' If

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[3] Thompson was professor of Applied Social Studies at Staffordshire University.

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their search for meaning in their own lives fails, they will be inevitably attacked by feelings of insignificance and nothingness. "The vacuum can be filled by either a developing sense of meaning or by symptoms such as anxiety, depression, despair, confusion, and the experience of anomie (meaninglessness)" (Lantz, 1986: 125). He supported people such as Vietnam veterans, schizophrenic clients, overweight people, older adults, clients with PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) and others, who seemed to be in a state of confusion.

Lantz thought that "Franklian intervention with the family group is directed toward the useful facilitation of the family's search for meaning" (Lantz, 1987: 66), and when they discovered their meaning on their own, the meaning would react "to an improvement in family interaction" (Lantz, 1987: 66). As mentioned above, he helped people or families who had serious problems such as Vietnam veterans. Some of them reported flashback experiences, intrusive thoughts and intrusive memories. From the existential point of view, these phenomena represented their search for meaning after having had traumatic experiences in the Vietnam War. When they were able to make some sense of their experiences, they were then able to recover from their symptoms. "Such a developing sense of meaning shrinks the symptoms which grow in the existential vacuum" (Lantz, Greenlee, 1990: 51).

Lantz's practice was his response to various problems seen in the realm of support for families. He referred to the techniques of Logotherapy, and made efforts to help his clients and their families grasp the meaning of their own 'existence.' Specifically, he used techniques such as 1) paradoxical intention, 2) dereflection, 3) Socratic dialogue, and 4) provocative comments. The first one, paradoxical intention, was a technique that was designed to break vicious circles that had developed as a result of anticipatory anxiety. The second technique, dereflection, was to decrease clients' superabundant fear about performing certain actions. The third one, Socratic dialogue, was to ask questions in a way that helps clients

became more aware of their own spiritual dimensions, their strengths, their hopes, and their achievements. This technique was directed to clients' self-discovery and to get in touch with their own Noetic unconsciousness by themselves. In addition, the social worker would take the role of the 'midwife' on this occasion. The last one, provocative comments, was to stimulate a change in clients' family interaction which would help family members to discover unique meanings as they occur in family interaction by social workers to engage in provocative behavior. In this technique, the worker promoted awareness of clients by giving directive words to them, such as "I suggest it be done this way" or "Why do you not do it like this?"

As mentioned above, the approach by Lantz was intended for people who were seized by fear or uneasiness. In the first place, clients would be in such a state because they always revolve around a concern for themselves as 'existence.' Other animals and plants, or inorganic substances never exist as self-concerned as human beings do, and also are never seized with feelings of uncertainty.

Finally, clients regained 'authentic communication' with other people through associating with social workers, and then they recovered their self-meaning. What made Lantz's framework unique was that it mentioned the concrete methods of how to help their clients who could not grasp the meaning of themselves. On the other hand, his framework was based on the Frankl's psychotherapeutic theory, and therefore Lantz's framework was not adequate to explain the reason why the modern society had produced the existential vacuum against their clients. This is thought to be the limitation of this framework.

III. Framework by Weiss Focusing on a 'I–Thou' Relationship

Weiss described 'alienation' as the difficult situation that human beings living in the present age fall into. According to Weiss, the modern men and women fall into an identity crisis and a

state of confusion, and they had to live with 'alienation' and friendlessness, plus insignificance and nothingness. Therefore, it was demanded that the modern social workers coped with this clients' situation, especially 'alienation.'

Weiss considered the cause of the 'alienation' to be the mode of the modern society itself. "Man is numbered, counted and classified for his placement in the producer-consumer economy of the modern society" (Weiss, 1975: 18). In other words, modern men and women lived in the so-called 'I–it' relationship. That was when 'alienation' was often seen in the clients.

Martin Buber said there were two ways for the human to be; the one was expressed by the basic term 'I–it.' This term represented namely 'the world as an object of experience'. It was "the world that is filled up with a non-personal thing, and the objective world that cause and effect inevitably rules" (Inamura, 2004: 136). People considered "the world and others surrounding them by a theoretical observational manner to be an object, and remove the personal relationship from them" (Inamura, 2004: 136). Weiss said that social workers could not correspond to the 'alienated' people as long as they depended only on traditional diagnostic clinical social work, because the traditional theories of social work understood clients objectively.

Weiss thought 'an existential encounter' was necessary to help 'alienated' people. That is to say, they need to form closer relationship with others, namely social workers. They could live with others in a so called 'I–thou (I–you)' relationship. This is another basic term put forward by Buber, and it means that people live together with interactive mutual relations based on their own personalities. "People recognize that the close relationship of human beings prevents distance forming among them; they naturally understand the importance of associating with the personality of others, facing each other directly, and recognizing others as irreplaceable existences" (Murata, 2004: 60). Ultimately, human beings could find meaning and purpose of their lives only from the close relationships with others, in other words only from the 'I–thou' relationship.

Weiss' existential social work supported people who were having problems of 'alienation' in this way. By basing his theory on Buber's way of understanding human beings, the two basic terms 'I–it' and 'I–thou,' Weiss directed people pursuing their own authentic ways not to be treated only as 'things,' in the former term 'I–it,' but also to be treated as 'existence,' their 'existence' revolves around a concern for themselves. What made this framework unique was that it mentioned the two types of attitudes that social workers could take towards their clients. For social workers, it is important to understand their clients as 'existence,' based on the 'I–thou' relationship. Actually, this framework emphasized the importance of this 'I–thou' relationship, but the explanation of the way to actualize this mutual relationship was not enough. It is thought that it would be difficult to realize this relationship only from the effort of social workers. What social workers need is to change the 'system' of social work which understand clients only from the 'I–it' perspective. Social workers need to construct the 'system' which actualize to understand clients from the 'I–thou' perspective. This seems to be a limitation in his framework.

IV. Framework by Thompson Understanding the Concept of 'Person and Environment' Dialectically

Thompson presented his own framework based on the existentialist thoughts of Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre was one of the most famous debaters of atheistic existentialism. Starting from the position that God does not exist, he came to the conclusion that human beings would be placed in a position of 'free existence' to choose their own way. None of us can escape from the freedom to choose for ourselves. "Man is condemned to be free: condemned, because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does." (Sartre, 2007: 29). A human being first exists, and "man is nothing other than what he

makes of himself" (Sartre, 2007: 22). On the other hand, if man is free to make his own choices; therefore, they cannot attribute blame to others for their own 'free' choices. "Man is responsible for himself" (Sartre, 2007: 23). Therefore, man will be always be tormented by anxiety. This is because he cannot have a principle of any choice, and will be left unredeemed without being able to determine whether their choice is right or not.

Sartre founded his theory of the 'existence' of human beings on the premise that they have consciousness. Materials and other living creatures without the consciousness of the human beings exist only as mere 'things.' In other words, they exist only as 'being-in-itself,' and are incapable of purposes or plans for them. Therefore, these are only to be as these are. On the other hand, human beings have consciousness. They have 'existence' to ponder in their own way, and they always exist as 'being-for-itself' to project themselves to their own future. This consciousness is fundamentally free and unfettered. In Thompson's framework, based on Sartre's philosophy, clients were defined as being in "a process of self-creation or self-definition" (Thompson, 1992: 175).

Thompson described clients as free 'existence' essentially in the Sartre's way. It is a sociopolitical context, as the environment surrounding them becomes the problem. Their authentic freedom is not merely established, and it is prescribed by this sociopolitical context. In other words, the existential freedom is prescribed by social political freedom and on the other hand, the sociopolitical freedom is prescribed by existential freedom. "Existence is simultaneously deeply personal and fundamentally social and political" (Thompson, 1992: 170).

"The sociopolitical context as it stands today is the result of past human action" (Thompson, 1992: 170), and the sociopolitical context in the future will be "the result of present and future actions" (Thompson, 1992: 170). Therefore, the task of social workers is to educate clients to form their own freedom in the sociopolitical context to realize their own authentic existential

freedom, 'a process of self-creation.' The relationship between a person and the environment is intrinsically dialectic. When a person confronts his environment, he must get over it as long as the sociopolitical context as environment inhibits his own existential freedom. An authentic 'existence' is "one in which I recognize that I am free and that I am responsible not for my actions, my selfhood but also for all humankind" (Thompson, 1992: 185). Based on Sartre's philosophy, Thompson emphasized clients' absolute freedom, and this made his framework unique. The freedom of clients will be possible only when the sociopolitical context enables the freedom. The main issue to deal with in Thompson's framework is 'the sublation (das Aufheben)' between the 'existence' of clients and their own sociopolitical context as environment. However, Thompson did not mention the concrete example of sublation in the social work practice. This is thought to be the limitation of his framework, and further development is expected.

V. Framework by Krill Understanding Clients as 'Being-in-the-World'

Krill developed his own framework to help clients who were suffering with alienation, in other words, people whose self was too unstable to grasp the meaning of their own. He found that these clients always had questions like "Who am I? Where am I going? What do I do next?" (Krill, 1978: 1). He aimed at the clients as such an unauthentic self to recover their true authenticity.

Those clients suffering with alienation were going to stabilize their unstable self to escape from their lonely and uneasy state. In other words, they were going to change that kind of state through increased inner strength. Krill depicted this phenomenon of clients as "the entrapment of the ego" (Krill, 1978: 44), and they were going to stabilize their unstable self by three means called "conformity, passion, and rationalism" (Krill, 1978: 45).

Krill said clients were in 'conformity' when their lives were ruled by others, and further, they

were going to live according to it. Furthermore, Krill said clients would deal with things with 'passion,' and they would try to be 'rational' to avoid feeling alienation. The clients in this state of 'the entrapment of the ego' were always going to escape from loneliness and uneasiness by using these three means, 'conformity,' 'passion,' and 'rationalism,' but they naturally became rather egocentric, and as a result, they always suffered from and with alienation.

According to Krill, it was "the bond with others" (Krill, 2011: 182) that was most necessary for clients suffering with alienation. Clients in the state of 'the entrapment of the ego' deem others secondary by giving top priority to themselves. However, human beings can find meaning in their own lives for the first time when they can form relations with others. When they come to recognize their own irreplaceability, namely the significance of their 'existence,' they can then grasp their own values for the first time. In this framework, clients allow themselves to give great importance to 'the bond with others' through interaction with social workers. Without using the three means mentioned above, they can still stabilize their own self in their connections with others.

Clients actually exist as 'existence.' They also exist as 'being-in-the-world' at the same time. "There is no separation of the 'I' from the world" (Krill, 1978: 38). They already found themselves in 'the world'. This 'world' is regarded as the context which seems to be "cultural and institutional" (Kadowaki, 2008: 56). It is thought to consist of "patterns of many premises and behaviors which have been conveyed and accepted untheoretically and tacitly" (Kadowaki, 2008: 56).

In the existential social work by Krill, social workers attempt to share 'the world,' namely 'the context,' with their clients. The clients in the state of 'the entrapment of the ego' deem others secondary. That is to say, they live only in 'the world' of egoism. Through talking with social workers, the clients come to share 'the world (or the context)' of the social work profession; the world in which 'the bond with others' has great importance. They can live with the premise of the social workers who recognize others as irreplaceable. In the end, clients can come to realize the importance of others. That is to say, they are able to come out from the state of alienation.

In the framework by Krill, clients were defined as 'existence.' Their 'existence' revolves around a concern for themselves. On the other hand, based on the thoughts of Heidegger, Krill understood clients as 'being-in-the-world.' The concept of 'others' was critically important for Krill, because he developed his own framework to help clients suffering with alienation; clients who could not form constructive relations between 'others.' The 'others' were defined according to 'the world (or the context)' of clients. When they were in the state of 'the entrapment of the ego' and were living in 'the world' of egoism, the 'others' were always secondary for them. On the other hand, when they were living in 'the world' which gave a great importance to 'the bond with others', 'the others' were defined as irreplaceable 'existence'. In the latter case, the clients would also define themselves as valuable 'existence.' Based on the works of Heidegger, clients were understood as 'existence' and also as 'being-in-the-world.' What made his framework unique was that he said the context defined the clients as 'existence.' Social workers can explain the concept of 'person-in-environment' in social work practice from the perspective of human way of living ('existence'). On the other hand, the terminology was so philosophical that his framework came to be seen as an abstract construct. This framework "seems foreign to the average practitioner" (Krill, 2011: 179). This is thought to be the limitation of this framework. In addition, this limitation can also apply to the other three theorists whom this article mentioned before.

VI. The Philosophical Diversity of Existential Approaches: The Differences among the Authors of the Approaches in the Issues That They Deal With

As mentioned above, the authors of existential

social work, Lantz, Weiss, Thompson, and Krill have developed their own frameworks. They have developed their practice theories based on the thoughts of philosophers or thinkers such as Frankl, Buber, Sartre, and Heidegger. At first, Lantz dealt with clients seized with fear or uneasiness. He recognized that they existed as 'existence', their 'existence' revolves around a concern for themselves. In other words, his framework focused on clients as 'existence' itself. Of course this framework focused on the relationships between clients and social workers, but the main issue it dealt with was the individual client who always exists as 'existence.' Next, in the framework by Weiss, clients were understood in their relations with 'others.' Clients were understood by the two basic terms 'I–it' and 'I-thou.' The aim of social workers here was for the clients to be able to live not only in the former relationship 'I–it,' but also in the latter one 'I–thou' through their interactions with social workers, namely through 'existential encounters.' In this framework by Weiss, the main issue was the clients' 'relationship' with others. While in Thompson's framework, the focus was on the dialectic relation between clients as 'existence' and the sociopolitical context as environment. According to Sartre, human beings are always fundamentally free, therefore the clients in social work practice are naturally free, but on the other hand, the sociopolitical context is a major problem to be solved. The main issue to deal with in Thompson's framework was the sublation between the 'existence' of clients which is always fundamentally free and their own sociopolitical context as environment. Finally, the framework by Krill was going to prescribe clients as 'existence,' namely their 'existence' revolves around a concern for themselves, but on the other side, it also prescribed them as 'being-in-the-world.' In this framework, the clients who were suffering with alienation were urged to form 'the bond' with others. According to Krill, 'others' were according to 'the world (or the context)' of clients. When they were in 'the world' of egoism, the 'others' were always secondary to themselves.

On the other hand, when they were living in 'the world (or the context)' where 'the bond with others' had a great importance, 'the others' were prescribed as irreplaceable 'existence.' In Krill's framework, the focus was on the 'being' of clients. Therefore, the main issue was that clients always-already existed as 'being-in-the-world.'

As this article has already examined, existential approaches by these four authors understand clients as 'existence,' but each of them focuses on different issues. Therefore these four approaches cannot simply be grouped together. This becomes clear for the first time, when the philosophical and theoretical thoughts of the four theorists are all examined.

Social work lays weight on "well-being" (IFSW, 2000; CSWE, 2008) of clients. Social workers aim to improve the situation of clients, and their practices are based on clients' own 'being.' Clients always-already exist as 'existence,' therefore their 'being' is fundamentally rooted in this 'existence.' In social work practices, existential approaches can offer a variety of ways for social workers to improve the situations of their clients. So, even today, it is worth considering these four existential frameworks in social work practices, however need to select the best, or most appropriate, framework that matches the particular situation of a particular client, because there are considerable differences among the four authors of the frameworks.

Well-being is not necessarily brought to a client after he is out of a particular stressful situation. But he cannot completely escape from suffering as long as he lives (he exists). This is the essence of life. Social workers are always with their clients through their helping process. By understanding the diversity of existential social work theories examined in this article, social workers are able to broaden the range of the interpretations of the variation of 'existence (suffering)' of their clients. That is where the outcome of this article can contribute to. Based on the philosophical perspectives of these different types of existential approaches, the author of this article will next study how social worker can

interpret the being of their clients. The other issue a social worker needs to examine is that client suffers as long as he exists, as this article has already mentioned, but his own suffering cannot be separated from the perspective of the social structure. Alienation is not only a subjective problem of clients but also an objective problem of "the social structure and the labor" (Saiko, 1982: 21). Until now, the existentialists have not necessarily examined this issue enough. Social work practice needs to be considered from this point of view.

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